Boy Scouts

In the Northwest or Fighting Forest Fires

FRONTISPIECE. Boy Scouts in the Northwest; or, Fighting Forest Fires.

Boy Scouts in the Northwest

Or

Fighting Forest Fires

By

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"Boy Scouts in Mexico; or
On Guard with Uncle Sam."

"Boy Scouts in the Canal Zone; o
The Plot Against Uncle Sam."

"Boy Scouts in the Philippines; or
The Key to the Treaty Box."

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Boy Scouts in the Northwest

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CHAPTER I.

A MOUNTAIN MYSTERY.

On a sizzling hot afternoon near the middle of August, in the year nineteen eleven, three boys dressed in the khaki uniform of the Boy Scouts of America stood on a lofty plateau near the British frontier, watching with anxious eyes the broken country to the south and west.

"Nothing stirring yet!" Jack Bosworth said, turning to Pat Mack and Frank Shaw, his companions. "Ned and Jimmie may be in trouble somewhere. I wish we had waited and traveled with them."

"Traveled with them!" repeated Frank Shaw. "We couldn't travel with them. We were fired—given the grand bounce—twenty-three sign. Ned seemed to want the space in the atmosphere we occupied at Missoula. Serve

them good and right if they do get distributed over the scenery."

"Never you mind about Ned Nestor and Jimmie McGraw," Pat Mack put in. "They can get along all right if someone isn't leading them by the hand. Suppose we fix up the camp and get ready for our eats?"

The boys turned away from the lip of the cañon upon which they had been standing and busied themselves putting up shelter tents and unpacking provisions and camping tools, as they called their blankets and cooking vessels.

They had passed the previous night in a sheltered valley lower down, sleeping on the ground, under the stars, and had breakfasted from the scanty stock of eatables carried in their haversacks. Early that morning a train of burros had landed their outfit at the end of a rough trail some distance below, and the boys, with long labor and patience, had carried it up to the plateau.

The men in charge of the burros had of course volunteered to assist in the work of carrying the goods to the place selected for the camp, but their offers had been declined with thanks, for the Boy Scouts were determined that for the present no outsider should know the exact location of their temporary mountain home.

Those who have read the previous books of this series* will not be at a loss to understand why the location of the camp in the Northwest was for a time to remain a secret, so far as possible. Ned Nestor, for whom those on the plateau were now waiting, had, some months before that hot August afternoon, enlisted in the Secret Service of the United States government.

Accompanied by Frank Shaw, Jack Bosworth, Jimmie McGraw and others, he had seen active diplomatic service during the Mexican revolution, had unearthed a plot against the government in the Panana Canal Zone, and had rendered signal service in the Philippines, where he had assisted in preventing an armed revolt against the supremacy of the United States government.

At the close of his service in the Philippines, he had been commissioned to investigate forest fire conditions in the Great Northwest. The boy had a wonderful native talent for detective work, and, besides, it was thought by the officials in charge of the matter that a party of Boy Scouts, camping and roving about in northern Idaho and Montana and in the southern sec-

* "Boy Scouts of Mexico; or, On Guard With Uncle Sam," "Boy Scouts in the Canal Zone; or, The Plot Against Uncle Sam," and "Boy Scouts in the Philippines; or, The Key to the Treaty Box." Chicago: M. A. Donohue & Company, Publishers.

tions of British Columbia, would be better able to size up the forest fire situation than a party of foresters or government secret service men.

So Ned and his four chums had sailed away from Manila, reached San Francisco in due season, and, after receiving further instructions and arranging for supplies, had headed for the frontier. At Missoula, Montana, he had sent Frank, Jack and Pat on ahead, after giving them the exact loaction of the future encampment and arranging for the transportation of supplies.

From the first there had been some mystery in the minds of the three concerning Ned's strange halt at Missoula. They could not understand why he had sent them on ahead of him, for he usually directed every detail of their journeyings. When questioned concerning this innovation, Ned had only laughed and told the boys to keep out of the jaws of wild animals and not get lost.

"I'll be in camp almost as soon as you are," he had said, "and will take the first mountain meal with you "

Yet the boys had reached the vicinity of the chosen location on the previous day, and Ned had not made his appearance. Naturally the boys were more than anxious about the safety of their leader.

"Did Ned say anything to you while at Missoula, about an aeroplane?" Jack asked of Frank as they unpacked bacon and corn meal. "You know, before we left the Philippines," he went on, slicing the bacon for the coming repast, "the officials said we were to have a government aeroplane. I was just wondering if the thing would get here after we have no use for it."

"He said nothing to me about the arrival of the aeroplane," Frank replied, "but I presume he knows when the government air machine will be on hand. It may be packed up at Missoula, for all we know," he added, "and Ned may have waited there for the purpose of getting it ready for flight."

"What the dickens can we do with an aeroplane in this wilderness?" demanded Pat, wiping the sweat from his face. "We can't run around among the trees with it, can we? Nor yet we can't get gasoline up here to run it with. Anyway, I'm no friend to these airships."

"When they travel with upholstered dining coaches in connection, and sleeping cars on behind," laughed Jack, "you'll think they're all to the good. If we can't chase around among the trees in an aeroplane," he continued, "we can sail over the forests and high peaks, can't

we? Without something of the sort, it would take us about a thousand years to get a look-in at this wild country."

"Well," Pat grumbled, "I only hope we won't get our necks broken falling out of the contraption. It may be all right to go up in one of the foolish things, but I think I'd rather take chances on going over Niagara Falls in a rain-water barrel."

"I half believe he will come in the aeroplane," Frank said, shading his eyes with his hand and looking out to the south. "He wants to surprise us, I take it, and that is why he acted so mysteriously about the matter."

"What about Jimmie?" demanded Pat, who would take almost any risk on water, but who was filled with horror the moment his feet left the solid earth. "He can't bring Jimmie along in his pocket, can he? And even if he managed to get the little scamp up on the thing, some trick would be turned that would land the 'plane on top of a high tree."

"Two can ride an aeroplane, all right," Frank insisted. "Anyway, quit your knocking. Ned knows what he is about, and we'll wait here for him if we have to remain until the Rocky Mountains wash down into the Pacific ocean."

"Suppose we climb up on the shelf above," Jack suggested, "and see if we can find anything in the sky that looks like an aeroplane. I really think Ned and Jimmie will travel here on the air line."

Pat fished a field-glass out of his haversack and passed it over to Jack.

"You boys go on up," he said, "and see what there is to be seen. I'll stay here and cook this bacon. I could eat a hog on foot right this minute. Where did you put those canned beans?"

"Never you mind the canned beans," laughed Jack. "It will be time enough to open them when you get the bacon fried to a crisp. I see our finish if you got one of the bean cans opened. Say, but I could eat a peak off the divide!"

"Well, the divide is up there, all right," Pat grinned, "go on up and take a bite off it. On this side that ridge away up there the rivers run into the Pacific ocean. On the other side they run into the Atlantic ocean. Split a drop when you get on top and send your best wishes to both oceans. And don't you remain away too long, either, for this bacon is going to be cooked in record-breaking time."

Leaving Pat to prepare the supper, Frank and Jack turned their faces upward toward the

main divide of the Rocky Mountains, 4,000 feet above their heads. It was a splendid scene, and they enjoyed it to the full. To the north the green forests of British Columbia stood crinkling under the almost direct rays of the August sun, to the east, almost over their heads, stood the backbone of the continent of North America, to the south stretched the broken land of Montana, while to the west lay the valleys and ridges of Idaho, Montana, and Washington beyond which pulsed the mighty swells of the Pacific.

Immediately to the north of the position occupied by the camp, and within a mile of the international boundary line, Kintla lake lay like a mirror in the lap of the mountains, reflecting peaks and silent groves in its clear waters. From the lake, ten miles in length by half that in width, an outlet flowed westward into the North Branch of the Flathead river.

The level plateau where the camp had been pitched was not far from two acres in extent, with the bulk of the mountain to the east, a drop of a thousand feet to the south, and steep but negotiable inclines to the west and north. The lake was 300 feet below the level of the plateau, which was about 3,000 feet above the sea level

and 4,000 feet below the summit of the divide at that point in the long range of mountains.

There were peaks to the north and south which showed eternal snow and ice, but there was a lowering of the shoulder of the great chain directly to the east, so there was no snow in sight there. There were forest trees low down in the cañon to the south, and on the slopes to the west and north, but the plateau and the sharp rise toward the summit were bare.

While Pat sliced his bacon and mixed cornmeal, soda, salt and water to make hoecakes, to be fried in bacon grease, Frank and Jack wormed their way up the face of the mountain, toward a shelf of rock some hundred feet above the plateau. It was hard climbing, but the lads persisted, and soon gained the elevation they sought, from which it was hoped to gain a fine view of the country toward Missoula.

"Good thing we don't want to go any farther," Frank exclaimed, throwing himself down on the ledge and wiping his streaming face. "We couldn't scale the wall ahead with a ladder. Now," he went on, "look out there to the south and see if there's an aeroplane in sight."

Jack brought out the field-glass and looked long and anxiously, but there was no sign of a man-made bird in the clear sky.

"I don't believe, after all, that he'll come in an aeroplane," the boy said, directly. "Suppose he took a notion to get a motor boat and run up the north branch of the Flathead river, and so on into Kintla lake, down there? How long would it take him to make the trip?"

"About ten thousand years," was Frank's reply. "He never could get up the north branch. There's too many waterfalls. Why, man, the stream descends several thousand feet before it gets to sea level."

"Anyway," Jack replied, "if you'll get out of my way I'll take a look at the lake through the glass."

"You'll probably see him come sailing up the slope in a battleship," Frank said, in a sarcastic tone.

Jack, without speaking, turned his glass to the north and gazed long and anxiously over the lake. Presently Frank saw him give a start of surprise and lean forward, as if to get a closer view of some object which had come into the field of the lens.

"What is it?" he asked.

Jack passed him the glass with no word of explanation, and the boy hastily swept the shores of the mountain lake.

"I don't see any motor boat," he said, directly.

"Well, what do you see?" Jack asked, expectantly.

"For one thing," Frank replied, "the smoke of a campfire."

"I saw that, too," Jack said, "and didn't know what to make of it. Also, I saw a rowboat sneaking around that green point to the east."

"That is what is puzzling me," Frank replied. "Years ago there was a Blackfoot reservation just over the divide, and a Flathead Indian reservation down by Flathead lake, to the south, but I had no idea the Indians were still about. Still, the people you saw were probably Indians. Suppose we go down there and look the matter up. We've got to have some sort of a yarn to tell Pat when we get back to camp."

The two boys scrambled down almost vertical surfaces, edged along narrow ledges, slid down easier inclines, and finally came to the rim of beach about the lake. There, at the eastern end of the pretty body of water, they came upon the still glowing embers of a fire.

Close to the spot where the remains of the fire glimmered in the hot air, they saw the mouth of a cavern which seemed to tunnel under the

body of the mountain to the east. There were numerous tracks about the fire, and some of them led to the entrance to the cavern.

"Whoever built this fire," Jack exclaimed, "wore big shoes, so it wasn't Indians. No, wait!" he added, in a moment, "there are tracks here which show no heel marks. What do you make of that?"

"Must be moccasins," Frank said. "The Indians may still be in the woods about here."

"I'm going into the cavern to see what's stirring there," Jack said, "and before I go I'll have a look at my artillery."

The boy looked his revolver over, and before Frank could utter a warning, he darted a- into the gloom of the cave. Frank did no low him, but turned in the direction of the poin where the boat had disappeared.

A dozen yards on his way he stopped and listened. A voice, sounding like that of a person in a deep well, reached his ears, and he turned back.

He gained the mouth of the cavern in half a minute and plunged inside. It was dark a dozen feet from the entrance, but he struck a match and moved on, finally coming to a smooth wall which appeared to shut off farther progress.

When he turned about and faced the opening every object between where he stood and the mouth stood revealed against the bright sunshine outside. There were a few loose rocks, a rude bench, a small goods box, and nothing else. Jack was nowhere in sight.

He examined the walls of the cavern but discovered no lateral passages. He called out to his chum, but received no response. Where was Jack? If he had left the cavern he would have been seen. It was a perplexing mystery, and the boy sat down on the box and listened for a repetition of the sounds he had heard.

For a moment no sounds came, then a voice, seemingly coming out of the solid wall behind him reached his ears. He could distinguish no words for a time, and then it seemed that he was being called by name.

He called to Jack again and again, but received no answer. Jack was evidently there somewhere, but where? The smooth walls gave no indication of any hidden openings, and there was in view no crevice through which a voice behind the walls might penetrate. It seemed either a silly joke or an impenetrable mystery.

CHAPTER II.

THE SIGNAL IN THE SKY.

Frank left the cavern in a moment and walked along the beach toward the campfire. His thought was to gather embers and fresh fuel and build up a blaze at the end of the cave which would reveal every inch of the interior. He was certain that Jack had not left the place, and decided that he had fallen into some hidden opening which had escaped his own investigation.

As he bent over the remains of the fire he heard a rattle of small stones, and, looking up, saw Pat coming down the declivity from the plateau where the tents had been set up. The incline was steep, and at times Pat was rolling rather than walking. He was in his shirt sleeves and bareheaded. At last his red head pitched toward the lake like a meteor in downward flight.

Frank rushed forward and caught him as he struck the beach, thus saving him from an impromptu bath. Pat struggled to his feet in an instant, rubbed his legs and arms to see if any bones had been broken, and then turned his head and looked up the incline.

"Talk about shooting the chutes!" he exclaimed. "I wonder what time I made coming down?"

"Sure you're not hurt?" asked Frank anxiously.

"Every inch of my body has three bruises, one on top of the other," Pat replied, "but I guess I'm able to walk. Say, but that was a roller-coaster glide!"

"Why did you try such a foolish caper?" asked Frank.

"Why, I saw you boys here," was the reply, "and started down. You know the rest, as the yellow-covered books say. What you boys doing here, wasting your time, with the bacon burning to a crisp?"

"We came here to investigate," was the reply, "and Jack went into the cavern, and vanished—just vapored into thin air. I'm going to build a fire in there and see if I can't condense him!"

"Well," Pat said, listening, "he may have vanished physically, but his voice appears to be on deck yet."

Three sharp calls came from the cavern, and both boys dashed inside. There was no doubt now that Jack's voice, at least, had condensed,

for the shouts coming from the back of the cavern were both hearty and imperative.

"Hi, there!" Jack called. "Pry this stone out of the doorway!"

"Where are you?" demanded Pat. "Which one of the walls do you want us to push in? You're a nice chump, getting in a scrape like this!" he added, with a laugh which must have been exasperating to the unseen boy.

"You'll find a crevice where the back of the cave joins the south wall," Jack said, his voice coming faintly to the ears of his chums. "Put your fingers in and pull. The blooming door opens outward. Hurry! It's stifling in here!"

After burning nearly all the matches they had in their pockets, and scorching their fingers on the short sticks, Pat and Frank discovered the crevice spoken of and inserted the ends of their fingers.

"Pull!" yelled Jack. "Pull, you loafers! It is moving!"

In a moment the south half of the back wall swung out so suddenly that both boys were thrown from their feet and Jack, who had been pushing with his whole strength, came tumbling on top of them as they lay on the floor of the cavern.

"What sort of a combination is this, anyway?" demanded Pat, struggling to his feet. "If I get any more bumps to-day I'll be taking something that belongs to some one else. I've had my share."

Frank sprang to the opening as soon as he could disentangle himself from the collection of arms and legs and looked in. All was dark and still inside, and a gust of dead air struck him in the face. Pat, leaning over his shoulder, laid a hand on the rock which had opened so strangely, and the next instant it closed softly, sliding into the opening like a door operated by well-oiled machinery.

"Now you've done it!" Frank exclaimed, disgustedly, as Pat threw himself against the stone in a vain effort to force it open again.

"No harm done," Jack exclaimed. "There's only a stinking cavern in there. Wow! I can feel snakes and lizzards crawling on me now! Come! Let us get into the open air. Stifles like a grave in here."

The boys hastened outside and stood meditatively before the shining waters of the lake, each one trying to think clearly concerning what had taken place. They believed themselves—or had believed, rather—miles away from any trace

of civilization, and yet here was a practical door of rock at the end of a cave almost under the great divide.

"We've found something," Frank said, at length. "That thing in there never happened. Human hands fashioned that door for some secret purpose. And it wasn't Indians, either."

"I guess we've run up against a band of train robbers," suggested Jack, with a grin.

"Probably the entrance to some deserted mine," Pat put in. "This region has been searched for gold for fifty years. I've heard of mines being concealed by moving stones."

"Well," Frank said, after a short silence, during which all listened for some indication of the immediate presence of the men who had been seen to row around the green point a short time before, "whatever the game is, we've got to remove every trace of our visit. When they come back they probably won't notice the tracks we have made, for there were plenty about before we came here, but we must gather up all the match-ends we left in there and leave the door as we found it."

"I found it open and walked in," Jack said, "and then it closed. Whew! I felt like I was being shut up in a tomb!"

"How large a place is it in there?" asked Pat.

"Don't know," was the reply. "I had no matches with me, and so could not see a thing."

"Then we won't have to open the door again to clean up any muss," Frank said, moving toward the entrance to the cavern.

"I wouldn't go in again for a thousand dollars," Jack cried. "If you leave it to me, the place is haunted. I heard groans in there."

Frank paused at the entrance and turned back. His matches were about gone, and so he took a burning stick from the fire, added two dry faggots to it, waited until the three burst into flame, and then entered the cave.

To gather up the half-burned matches which had been scattered over the floor was the work of only a moment.

"Now you'll have to open the door, if you leave it as I found it," Jack said, looking in from the mouth. "Pat will help you."

"Come on in, both of you," Frank directed.

"Not me!" cried Jack. "I hear bones rattling!"

The boys thought he was joking at first, but it soon appeared that he was in sober earnest, so Pat and Frank, by exerting their entire strength, managed to open the door without his assistance.

"You're afraid of the dark!" Pat taunted, as the boys gathered around the fire again.

"I'm not half as afraid of the dark as you are of an aeroplane," Jack replied. "If I ever see you going up in a 'plane, I'll go in there alone."

"Don't you ever forget that," Pat grinned.

"Oh, I'll be game, all right," was the reply.

Before leaving the beach for the camp the boys walked to the point around which the boat had gone and scanned the lake and its shores through the field-glass. There was no sign of life anywhere, except where the birds swung from forest limbs back from the rim of the lake and called each other through the sultry air.

Reaching the camp after a weary climb, they did full justice to the meal which Pat had prepared, though the bacon and the hoecakes were stone cold, or at least as cold as anything could be in that glare of sunlight. Then, the dishes washed and the beds prepared for the night, they sat down to watch the lake and the sky to the south, for it was now the general belief that Ned would make his appearance with the aeroplane which had been promised by the government officials.

The point they had last visited, as well as the location of the fire, was in full view of the

plateau, so the boys made no efforts to conceal their presence there. The men who had been observed in the boat must have noted their presence on the plateau before taking their leave. Perhaps, they reasoned, they had taken their departure because of this invasion.

The sun sank lower and lower in the sky, turning the plateau and the smooth waters of the lake to gold, still there were no signs of Ned, no indications of the return of the boat to the place from which it had been launched. Half an hour after dark, Frank, who was looking through the field-glass, caught sight of light in the south which did not appear to come from any star.

"Here he comes!" he cried. "That's an aeroplane, all right!"

As the light drew nearer, traveling rapidly, the sharp explosions of the gasoline engine became audible. Then a light flickered over the upper plane, passed off, and swept the white surface again.

"How does he make that?" demanded Pat. "Looks like a great question mark."

"That's what it is," Frank exclaimed. "Now, what does he mean by it?"

CHAPTER III.

JUST A TYPEWRITER RIBBON.

"I don't understand what question he is asking," Jack said, "but I know how he makes the signal. He has an electric flashlight, and he tips the plane—the upper plane—forward, like he was plunging to the earth, and writes the interrogation mark on the under side with the flame of the flashlight. See? Then it shines through the canvas and we read it! Great idea!"

"That must be the way of it," Frank said, "but what does he want? And how does he expect us to answer?"

"If I was up there in the dark on a contraption like that," Pat said, "I'd be asking how I was going to find a landing place."

"Sure!" Frank cried. "Ned wants to know where we are, and whether it is safe for him to make a landing. Dunderheads! Why didn't we think of that before? He is passing now, and may not come back again."

The light flashed by at swift speed, whirled, ascended several hundred feet, and came over the

plateau, repeating the signal. Then it settled down into a steady circling of the camp.

"He knows where we are, all right," Pat said. "What he wants to know is if it is safe for him to make a landing. If I ever go up in one of those things I'll drag a rope so I can climb down it."

"I'll tell him what he wants to know," Frank said, "if you'll get me a long stick on fire most of its length."

"Wigwag?" asked Jack.

"Sure!" was the reply. "Now," Frank continued, "build four fires, one on each edge of the plateau. That will show him how large the place is. Then I'll take the flaming stick and wigwag o. k. Ned'll understand that."

Pat watched the wigwag signal with interest.

"I saw foolish signs like those in the Philippines," he said, with a grin. "The natives use them to talk treason to each other. I've heard that the same method is used by the East Indians who talk from one mountain top to another faster than words on a wire. How does he make the o. k. signal?"

"O is one left, followed by one right," Jack replied, "and k is left, right, left, right. You won't think the signs are foolish when you see

how quickly Ned reads them. See! He's shooting away now."

"Perhaps he thinks the signals are being made by savages," Pat said.

The aeroplane darted off to the west for half a minute, then whirled and came back. The boys could not see the great 'plane distinctly, but the lights which burned on the front were bright and clear, so they saw that the 'plane was sweeping toward the earth as it advanced in their direction.

"I don't believe many professionals would care to make a landing like this," Frank said, as the machine dipped and slid to the ground, exactly in the center of the plateau.

"Hello, Ned!" he yelled, as the aeroplane rolled over the smooth surface for an instant and stopped.

In a second the three boys were gathered about the machine, pulling at the hands and feet of the daring riders. Jimmie McGraw bounded to the ground as soon as he could cast off the lines which had held him to his quivering seat.

"Say," he cried, "you got a fire here? I'm most froze."

Indeed the little fellow's teeth were chattering.

"Cold?" echoed Pat. "We're melting down here. You're scared, that's what's the matter with you. You're scared stiff."

Jimmie made a run for the speaker but brought up at the fire where the supper had been cooked.

"Here's comfort!" he cried, extending his hands out over what was left of the small blaze. "The next time you get me up in the air I don't go! I've been freezing for an hour."

In the meantime Ned Nestor was caring for the aeroplane, looking after the delicate machinery and covering it carefully with a huge oilcloth. Pat stood watching the work with a grin on his face.

"Are you thinking of giving me a ride in that thing?" he asked.

"Not to-night!" laughed Ned.

"Well, when you get ready for me to ride the air," Pat said, "just tell me the night before, and I'll shoo myself into the hills. If I'm going to fall off anything, I'll take the drop from something solid, like a mountain top."

"No danger at all, when you know how to operate the machine," Ned replied. "There's danger in running anything if you don't know how, even a sewing machine."

"Where did you pick it up?" asked Frank.

"He didn't pick it up at all," interposed Pat. "It picked him up."

"I found it at Missoula," was the reply, "all packed and stored away in a freight warehouse. I had to get it out at night, and so lost time. The people would have kept me there until now giving exhibitions if I had shown up during the day."

"But you did leave there in the daytime," urged Jack. "You were never in the air since last night."

"We left early this morning," was the reply, "and I was well up in the sky before many of the people saw me."

"I never knew you could run one," Frank said.

"Oh, I had some instructions from the Wrights," was the modest reply, "and, besides, there was an expert at Missoula who helped me get the machine together and contributed a few parting instructions."

"Then you've been in the air all day?" asked Pat.

"No, we stopped several times, of course, once on the right of way of the Great Northern railroad and filled our gasoline tanks," was the

reply, "and rested there a few hours. Jimmie had to eat there, of course!"

"Eat!" came the boy's voice from the fire. "If I ever get a bite at food again it will drop down into the toes of me shoes! Here!" he shouted, as Pat produced a can of pork and beans and started to open it. "You needn't mind opening that! I'll just swallow it as it is."

"Bright boy!" laughed Pat, handing him a liberal supply of beans and fried bacon. "Now fill up on that and then loosen up on your impressions of the sky."

"I thought I'd make an impression on the earth before I got through," Jimmie mumbled, his mouth full of beans. "We went up so far that the mountains looked like ant hills, didn't we, Ned?"

"About 7,000 feet," was the reply. "You see," he added, turning to Frank, "I wanted to size up the situation before I landed. If there is anybody in this upturned country at all, our presence here is known. The aeroplane's chatter took good care of that. And, besides, our landing in the night, with the lights going, gave unmistakable evidence of something stirring."

"I should say so," Frank agreed.

"And so," Ned went on, "I wanted to learn if there were people about here, so I might visit

them in the morning and put up the bluff of Boy Scouts playing with an aeroplane in the woods. We can't attempt anything in the mysterious line," he went on. "We've got to be entirely frank about everything except the business we are here on."

"Well," Frank said, "we found people here to-day and called on them."

"What sort of people?"

"Well, they seemed to have good broad backs," laughed Frank.

"They ran away from you?" asked Ned, in surprise. "I should think they would have proved inquisitive. Where were they?"

"Down by Kintla lake."

"Indians?" asked Ned.

Then Frank told the story of the visit to the shore of the lake and the cavern, taking good care to describe the surroundings as closely as possible. Ned laughed when the boy came to Jack's adventure in the hidden chamber.

"I say it is some deserted mine," Pat declared, when Frank had concluded the recital. "What else could it be?"

"Robber's nest!" suggested Jack.

Ned remained silent for a moment and then abruptly asked:

"What kind of footwear made those heelless prints?"

"You may search me!" Jack cut in.

"Must have been Indian moccasins," Frank observed.

Jimmie, who had been standing by the small fire, listening to the talk, now advanced to the little circle about the machine and uttered one word: "Chinks!"

"It is always Chinks with Jimmie," grinned Frank. "When there is a cyclone in New York the Chinks are to blame for it, if you leave it to him."

"What would Chinks be doing up here?" demanded Pat.

"Don't they get gold by washing it out?" asked Jack, with a nudge at Jimmie's side. "Perhaps they're going to start a laundry!"

While this chaff was in progress Ned stood looking thoughtfully in the direction of the lake. Not a word did he say regarding the sudden and brief communication Jimmie had presented.

"Any forest fires in sight?" asked Pat, finally breaking the silence.

"Not one," Jimmie answered. "I would have dropped into one if it had come my way. It was fierce up there!"

"It is rather cool when you get up a couple of miles," Ned laughed, "and Jimmie wouldn't listen to reason regarding his clothes. To-morrow I'll give one of you boys a ride, and you may see for yourself."

"Not me!" Pat exclaimed. "I'll stay below and help pick up the pieces."

"I should like to go," Frank said. "We may find the people we saw in the rowboat. When we become acquainted with them we may be able to learn something about that cavern."

"I would advise remaining silent about the cavern," Ned said. "It may be used for some criminal purpose, and we must not admit that we know of its existence. We are just carefree lads, here for an outing, remember," he added, with a laugh, "and we are due to make friends with everybody we come across."

"But you made us lug all this camping outfit up here," complained Jack, "so the men who steered the burros up the hills wouldn't know where we camped. What about that?"

"I thought it best to cut off all communication with the people below," explained Ned. "It may be that the purpose of our visit here is suspected. In that case some one from below might want to find us—for no good purpose.

So we'll keep out of sight of the people in the towns, unless they see our aeroplane, and cultivate the acquaintance of the natives—if there are any."

"How about gasoline and provisions?" asked Pat.

"I have plenty of gasoline stored on the right of way of the Great Northern railroad," Ned replied, "enough to last us a month. It was piped into a hidden tank from an oil car by a train crew now out of the state. We are to get provisions at the same place, if we need more, for Uncle Sam fixed all the details for us. All we have to do is to find the fellows who are setting forest fires and bring them to punishment."

"We ought to locate every little smudge, with that aeroplane," Frank suggested.

"That is my idea," Ned replied. "Have you been keeping a good lookout on the lake since you left it?" he added, turning to Pat.

"Some one of us has had eyes on it every minute," was the satisfactory reply. "No one has returned, I'm sure."

"You're not thinking of going there to-night, are you?" asked Jack, with a slight shiver. "I wouldn't go in there again, even in broad daylight, for a million dollars!"

"Pat is afraid of the sky, and Jack is afraid of the bowels of the earth!" laughed Frank. "We'll have to tuck them both in bed before we can accomplish anything."

"You may all go to bed but one," Ned said, looking about the group, his eyes finally resting with a significant look on Frank's excited face. "I want to look through that cavern before anything is taken out of it."

Frank, knowing the meaning of the look he had received, went to his little tent for his revolver and his electric searchlight and was soon ready for the expedition. Jimmie looked sulky for a moment at being left out of the game, then his face brightened and he crawled into the tent that had been prepared for Nestor and himself and burst into a fit of laughter.

"I'll show 'em!" he said, stuffing the blanket into his mouth to suppress the sound of his merriment. "I'll teach 'em to put me in the discard."

"Any wild animals up here?" asked Ned, as the two started away down the steep declivity.

"Two Black Bears and three Wolves!" called Jimmie, from his tent.

This was a reference to the Boy Scout Patrols to which the boys belonged. Frank and Jack

were members of the famous Black Bear Patrol of New York City, while Ned, Pat and Jimmie were members of the Wolf Patrol.

As the lad spoke Frank and Jack broke into growls which might well have come from the throat of the grizzliest grizzly in the Rocky Mountains, while Pat sent forth a wolf howl, which might well have been a signal to the pack.

"You may meet the real thing out here," warned Ned, turning back to look over the plateau, now shining in the light of a half-moon. "There are both bears and wolves in this region. When you meet them, don't wait for Boy Scout signs!"

"Oh, we'll initiate 'em, all right," Jimmie called from the tent, and Ned and Frank moved on down the declivity toward the lake.

It was still early evening, and the moon was low down in the east, so the valley where the lake lay was not touched by its light. Indeed, the plateau where the boys were would have been in the shadow of the mountain only for the dropping of the shoulder of the divide.

In half an hour the two boys, after several slides which were anything but pleasant, gained the beach. The campfire was now dead, and

the locality was still save for the voice of a night bird and the occasional splash of a leaping fish. The mouth of the cavern loomed like a dark patch on the lower bulk of the mountain.

Making as little noise as possible, Ned and Frank crept into the cavern, advancing by the sense of feeling until they came to the very end before turning on one of the electric flashlights. The round eye of the flame showed a long, narrow, tunnel-like tube running directly east, under the mountain. The door of rock was as the boys had left it earlier in the day.

Ned examined that portion of the rock which had swung out into the first chamber with considerable care, as the story of the swinging stone had interested him greatly. All along the top, up to the center, he found the checks of a stone-chisel. Exactly in the middle an elevation of an inch fitted into a round cavity in the upper rock. At the bottom the same conditions were discovered.

"Rather a clever job," Ned said, "but I don't see how it was ever done."

"This door," Frank said, "is not exactly like the remainder of the wall in grain, so it must have been brought here from some other locality.

Of course there was a hole between these two chambers, or the second one would never have been found. It would be easy enough to fit the stone door in by grooving out from the lower cavity and sliding the under pivot in."

"Sure," Ned replied, getting down to examine the lower part of the door more closely, "and that is just what was done. Then the groove was filled with concrete. Pretty classy work here!"

"And now the question is this," Frank went on, "what was the door fitted for? Why did the men who found the cave desire privacy? Is there gold in there? Have the men who have been setting fire to the forests established a home here? Is this the hiding place of a band of outlaws? You see there are lots of questions to ask about the two caverns," Frank added, with an uneasy laugh.

Ned closed the stone door and turned on both electric flashlights, making the place light as day where they stood. The inner cavern was as bare as the outer one save for dead leaves and grass which lay in heaps on the stone floor, and for half a dozen rough benches which were piled in one corner. At the farther end hung a gaudy

curtain, once handsome, but now sadly spotted with mildew because of dampness.

"Here's the inner chamber," laughed Frank, drawing the curtain aside. "And it looks like it was the private office of the bunch, too," he added, as he turned the light about the walls.

There was a desk in the third cavern, a swivel chair, a small case of books, and a rusty safe, which looked as though it had not been opened for years. A current of fresh air came from the rear, and a small opening was soon discovered.

"That doubtless leads to some cañon not far away," Ned said. "Makes a pretty decent place of it, eh?"

"Good enough for any person to hide in," replied Frank. "Now," he added, "tell me what you think of it. Who cut this cavern, and who brought the furniture here? I'll admit that my thinker is not working."

"Nature made the caverns," Ned replied. "There is what geologists call a fault in the rock here. Owing to volcanic action, doubtless, the strata shifted, probably thousands of years ago, and when the seam appeared the broken pieces fell apart. These chambers show the width of the seam. There undoubtedly was a great earth-

quake at the time, and the lake below might have been dredged out at that time."

"Of course," Frank said, "I might have known that! Now, here's another question: How far does this seam extend under the Rocky Mountains? If it passes beyond these three chambers, why not make a fourth room for ourselves so as to be on the spot when the men who make headquarters of the place come back?"

"That may be a good thing to do," Ned admitted, "but, still, I would not like to be the one to lie in wait here. Suppose we try to learn something of the character of the people who come here? They seem to sleep on dry leaves and eat off benches. Rather tough bunch, I take it. Perhaps we have struck Uncle Sam's enemies the first thing!"

Keeping their lights on, and working as silently as possible, always with an eye to the outer cavern, the boys made a careful search of the inner chamber. The desk was not fastened, and a cupboard afterward discovered in a niche was open also. There were dishes in the cupboard and writing materials in the desk.

At the very bottom of the desk drawer Ned came upon a surprise.

"Not so tough as I supposed," he said, turning to Frank. "Here's a typewriter ribbon. The sort of people who set fire to forests and hold up trains are hardly in the typewriter class. What do you make of it?"

"Well," Frank said, with a chuckle, "if you'll tell me what the inhabitants of this place want of typewriter ribbons I'll tell you why they bring great tins of opium here. It seems that we have struck something more important than forest fires."

CHAPTER IV.

THE AEROPLANE IN DANGER.

A strong wind came out of the Western Sea at ten o'clock that night and swept the lofty plateau as a woman might have swept it with a new broom. Ned and Frank, pursuing their investigations in the cavern, knew nothing of what was going on at the camp, but Jack and Pat were not long in ignorance of the danger of the situation.

With the first strong rush of wind the boys were on their feet, steadying the aeroplane, driving stakes wherever the nature of the ground permitted, and running bracing cords. The shelter tents went down instantly and were blown against the rocks of the east, where they waved canvas arms in the tearing breeze like sheeted ghosts.

The black clouds which swarmed up from the valley brought no rain, but fitful flashes of lightning and deep-toned thunder made a threatening sky. The roaring of the swirling trees in the cañon and on the slopes came up to the ears of the boys like the boom of a strong surf.

After persistent efforts the boys succeeded in bracing the aeroplane so that there was little danger of its being swept away, though they still remained with their backs to the wind, holding on. As time passed, they crept close together in order that the situation might be discussed.

"Lucky thing we remained here," Pat said, tugging with all his might to steady the monster machine against a particularly vicious dash of wind.

"It would have gone sure, if we hadn't," Jack screamed back. "I wish Ned and Frank would come and help. My back is creaking like a shaft that needs oiling with the strain on it."

"A little help wouldn't go amiss," Pat admitted, shouting at the top of his lungs in order that he might be heard above the whistling of the storm.

"I wonder if we'll ever be able to put the tents up again?" Jack shouted. "They are flapping and snapping like musketry out there on the rocks. I hope they won't blow away entirely."

Pat gazed anxiously in the direction indicated, but could only see pieces of canvas bellying up in the wind, mounting upward like balloons

at times, then falling back to earth when a short lull came in the storm.

"Why," he cried, in a moment, "where's Jimmie? I thought I saw him here a moment ago. Have you seen him?"

"Not since the storm," panted Jack.

"He may have been smothered in his tent," Pat shouted. "You hold on here while I go and look him up."

"Be sure that you keep close to the ground," warned Jack. "If you don't you'll be blown away."

It was not at all difficult for the lad to reach the flapping tents, for the wind generously assisted him in the journey. Only that he crept on his hands and knees he would have been tossed against the wall where the tents lay.

Struggling with the tearing canvas, bracing himself against the face of the cliff, the boy looked over the ruined tents but found no indication of the presence of the boy he sought, either dead or alive. Then he felt along the angle of the foot of the rise with no better success.

"He's not there," he reported, crawling back to Jack, now braced tenaciously with his toes and elbows digging into the soil above the rock.

"Did you find his clothes?" asked Jack.

"Not a thing belonging to his outfit," was the reply.

"Well, he went to bed, didn't he?" asked Jack, a sudden suspicion entering his mind.

"He went into his tent," was the reply, "but I did not see him undress."

Then Pat, much to his astonishment, heard Jack laughing as if mightily pleased over something that had taken place.

"You've got your nerve!" he exclaimed. "Laughing at a time like this. I'll bet the kid has been blown off the plateau."

There was now a little lull in the drive of the wind and Jack nudged his companion with his elbow, turning an amused face as he did so.

"Blown off nothing!" he said. "You saw how he acted when Ned went off without him—how sulky he was?"

"I noticed something of the sort."

"Well, Jimmie ducked after him!"

"Why, he was told to remain here."

"He has been told that before," Jack said, "and he's never obeyed orders. He followed Ned from Manila to Yokohama, not long ago, and made a hit in doing it, too. Oh, it is a sure thing that Jimmie is not far from Ned at this minute."

"The little scamp!" grinned Pat.

"He seems to think that Ned can't get along without his constant presence and his pranks," Jack continued. "He generally stirs something up in his immediate vicinity, but he's a pretty good scout at that."

"I hope he is with Ned," Pat said.

The wind now died down a bit, so that it was no longer necessary to hold the aeroplane, and the boys, after seeing that the rope still held, began the work of repairing the tents.

The clouds drifted away and the moon looked down as bravely as if it had not just hidden its face from sight at the threats of the wind! The electric flashlights with which the boys were well provided seemed inadequate and Pat started in to build a fire.

"I don't know about that," Jack said. "If there had been a fire here when that wind came up it would have been roaring in the cañon now. The storm would have swept it down on the trees there, and the whole gully would soon have become a roaring furnace. Better cut out the fire."

"I guess you are right," Pat said, reluctantly laying his dry faggots aside.

While the boys worked, trying to restore the shelter tents to something like form, the wind came up once more and reached out for the aeroplane. Pat and Jack renewed their holding efforts, and thanked their stars that no fire had been built on the plateau, for the forest about was dry as tinder.

Presently a voice which neither recognized came out of the shadows cast by a mass of clouds just then occupying the sky where the moon should have been.

"Hello!" the voice said.

The boys looked at each other in perplexity for a moment and then Jack answered back.

"Hello!" he said.

"Are you all safe up here, safe and sound?" the voice asked, and then the figure of a tall man, roughly dressed, but bearing the manner, as faintly observed in the darkness, of a gentleman, advanced toward the aeroplane, to which the lads were still devoting their whole attention.

"Safe and sound!" repeated Pat.

The stranger sat down by Jack's side and laid hold of the aeroplane.

"Pulls hard, doesn't it?" he asked, as the machine, forced by the wind, drew stoutly on the ropes and the muscles of the boys.

"Pulls like a horse," Jack replied.

"I'm Greer, of the forest service," the stranger said, in a moment. "I saw a fire up here this afternoon, and I was afraid harm might come from it during the gale. One blazing brand down in that cañon, and millions of feet of timber would be destroyed."

"As you see," Jack said, "we have no fire."

"This, I presume," Greer said, still pulling at the machine, "is the aeroplane your friends came in this evening.?'

"The same," replied Pat shortly.

The lad was annoyed to think that the forester, as he called himself, had been watching them. If he had taken so much interest in their movements, Pat thought, why hadn't he shown himself before?

Jack's thoughts seemed to be running in the same direction. In fact, both boys were suspicious of this soft-spoken stranger who had come to them out of the storm with questions on his lips.

"Where are your friends?" Greer asked, in a moment. "I hope they are not out in the forest thinking of starting a fire?"

"They've gone to the lake after fish," Jack

said, accounting for the absence of the others with the first words that came to his lips.

Greer gave a quick start and leaned over to look into Jack's face.

"Down at the lake?" he repeated. "Not out in a boat in a storm like this?"

"No," replied Jack, gruffly, so gruffly, in fact, that the stranger caught the hostile note and turned away.

"I'm always afraid of fire on a night like this," Greer continued in a moment, "and rarely sleep until morning. My cabin is back on the mountain a short distance, some distance above this plateau. That's how I happened to see what was going on here."

"Rather a lonely life," Pat said, resolved to keep the fellow talking if he could. "Because," he reasoned, "you can tell what's in a man's head if he keeps his mouth open and his tongue moving, but no one can tell the secret locked up behind closed lips."

"Yes, it is rather lonely," Greer replied. "I'm glad you boys are here. Going to remain long?"

"Only a few weeks—just to hunt and fish," was Jack's reply.

"If you don't mind," Greer went on, "I'll come down and visit you now and then."

The statement almost took the form of a question, and Jack gave a grudging answer that the visits would be a pleasure, though he believed that the man was arranging a way of watching their movements.

"I wish this wind would go down," Greer said, presently. "As I said before, I'm always afraid of fire on nights like this. See! The wind blows straight off the distant ocean strong and steady, and a fire started out there to the west would run over this plateau and over the mountain like a wash of tide."

"There's nothing to burn on the plateau," Jack said, glad of an opportunity to contradict the stranger.

"Nothing to burn!" Greer repeated. "I reckon you don't know much about forest fires, young man! Why, it would burn the soil down to bed rock, even evaporate the water in the rock itself and crumble it down to ashes. A forest fire is no joking matter."

The boys remained silent, looking cautiously into each other's faces and both wondering how a forester, a man marooned in a great wilderness should be so exact in his speech, should wear

such a shirt—actually a dress shirt—as they saw under his rough coat when the wind blew it aside.

"I rather think there's more company coming," Greer continued, seeing that the boys were not inclined to comment on his warnings. "A moment ago I saw a flash of light at the foot of the rise to the west."

The wind was still blowing fiercely, but both boys turned and looked down the incline. There was a faint light there now, glimmering among the trees.

"It looks like a lantern," Greer said. "And the fellow seems about to climb the hill. Good luck to him, in this gale."

"It seems to me," Pat said, "that the light we see is running along on the ground. If that should be a forest fire, there would be the dickens to pay to-night—and nothing to pay with!"

"That is not the way forest fires start," Greer said, turning indolently in the direction of the divide. "That is a man with a lantern."

The boys watched the glimmer below with interest. The man with the lantern, if there was a man and a lantern, seemed to be moving with the wind. Then, again, he seemed to divide himself, as the lower orders of life at the bottom

of the seas divide themselves, appearing on both sides of a dark space at the same moment.

They were satisfied that something unusual was going on, but were for the moment lulled into a half-sense of security by the positive assertions of the alleged forester. Presently they turned away from the scene below and fixed their eyes on the stranger.

He was standing straight up, his tall figure braced against the wind, peering down into the cañon. Notwithstanding the steady wind, the sky was now comparatively free of clouds, and they saw him lift a hand with something bright shining in it.

It appeared to the lads that he was signaling to some one in the cañon. They turned away instantly so that Greer did not note their observation of him, and again fixed their gaze on the slope to the west.

The lantern, if there was a lantern, was growing larger! It was showing itself in half a dozen places now, and was tracing lights far up in the crotches of dead trees. Then the penetrating odor of burning wood and grass came up the slope.

Filled with a fear which could hardly be expressed in words, the boys faced Greer again.

He still stood facing the cañon to the south, but his hands were not lifted now. There was no need for that, the boys thought, for the previous signal seemed to have sufficed.

Among the dry faggots on the ground at the bottom of the cañon there was another man with a lantern. He, too, if there was such a man, was moving about among the trees and dividing himself into sections, as the rudimental creatures of the world multiply themselves. Pat sprang to Greer's side and shook him roughly by the arm.

"There's a fire down there!" he cried.

In the uncertain moonlight the boy saw the stranger's face harden.

"You are mistaken," he said, turning away toward the lake.

"Smell the smoke!" Jack shouted. "I tell you the forest is on fire on two sides of us."

"Then your friends have set the fires!" Greer shouted, against the wind. "I have been suspicious of you all along—ever since you failed to satisfactorily account for the absence of your friends. It is all very well for you to come here in an aeroplane and start a conflagration! But how do you think that we, who are not so well provided with means of getting away, are to escape death?"

Pat drew back his hand, as if to strike the fellow, but Jack restrained him.

"You set the fires!" Pat shouted, then. "You set it through your fellow conspirators! I saw you signaling to the cañon!"

"You're no more a forester than I am!" Jack added. "You're a scoundrel, and ought to be sent to prison for life."

There was no more talk for a time. Greer stood defiantly against the wall of rock to the east, as if fearful of an attack from behind, his right hand in his bulging pocket. The boys knew that he had a weapon there, and their own hands were not empty.

The aeroplane drew and shivered in the rising gale, but now little attention was paid to it. Pat and Jack were listening for some indication of the return of Ned and Frank. No farther fable of a man with a lantern was necessary, for fire was racing up the western slope, heading directly for the plateau and the priceless aeroplane. Down in the cañon the flames were leaping from tree to tree. A stifling smoke filled the air, always in swift motion, but stifling still.

CHAPTER V.

THE REVELATION OF A TRAGEDY.

"Smugglers!" Frank exclaimed, dropping an armful of unopened opium tins on the floor of the cavern. "Smugglers, all right, all right!"

Ned looked the tins over carefully. They were well covered with Chinese characters, and were dirty, as if they had been hidden away in the earth for a long time.

"Who would have suspected it?" Frank continued. "We are close to the British frontier, but, all the same, this seems to me to be an awkward place to land and store the dope stuff."

"Where did you find it?" asked Ned.

"There is a false back to that cupboard in the north wall," Frank replied. "When I knocked on the boards they gave forth a hollow sound, and so I tore one away. Hence the opium. And there are pipes there, too—just such pipes as one sees in the joints on Pell street, in little old New York."

"You remember what Jimmie said?" asked Ned.

"I remember a good many things the little rascal has said," was the laughing reply. "He's always saying something."

"Well," Ned continued, " the boy was right when he expressed his opinion of the heelless footprints in one word."

"Chinks!" grinned Frank. "Of course!"

The boys now went over to the cupboard in the niche and began tearing away the boards. After a few had been displaced Ned stopped and began experimenting in fitting them in position again.

"What's doing now?" demanded Frank.

"We must remove them so as to be able to return them as we found them before we leave," Ned replied. "It is important that the inhabitants of this robber den do not know that we have discovered it."

"Don't you ever think they don't know it right now," Frank said. "We haven't seen any of them since they rowed around the point, but they're stirring about, just the same. We may see more of them before we get out of this cavern."

"Well," Ned said, "we must take all the precautions needful, and if they are of no avail we shall not be to blame for what takes place.

Even if they know that we have found the cavern, they need not know that we have penetrated into the office chamber. Now, draw that last board away carefully, and we'll see what there is behind the false bottom."

Frank drew the board away and was confronted by a long, low tunnel—an uncanny, narrow tunnel which had evidently been enlarged from a fault in the rock, and which appeared to penetrate far into the bulk of the mountain.

"See!" he cried. "The cupboard was built at the mouth of a cross fault in the rock, and there is no knowing what is behind it. Hold your flashlight higher and I'll crawl in and look about."

"Be careful," Ned warned. "I have seen great holes at the bottom of tunnels like that. Don't break your neck, or tumble down so far that I can't fish you out."

Frank grinned and crept through the opening made by the removal of the back of the closet. The place was not high enough for him to stand upright, and so he proceeded on hands and knees.

"This is a bedroom," he shouted back to Ned. "There's lots of ticks and blankets here."

There was silence for a moment, and then the boy's voice came from farther in the tunnel.

"And here's kegs of whisky," he cried. "It smells like a Bowery saloon. Come on in!"

"I think one of us would better remain outside," Ned replied. "I wouldn't like to be surprised while in there and fastened in with rocks."

Frank went on down the tunnel for some distance, calling back, now and then, to report his discoveries. There were weapons stored there, barrels of gasoline, packages of dynamite.

Then, for several long minutes, there came no voice from the interior, and Ned put his head inside and called out softly:

"Frank!"

There was no reply, and Ned was about to advance into the opening when the sound of a footstep came on the rocky floor of the chamber just behind him. The footstep was a stealthy one, halting, as if some person were listening between the steps. Ned's first act was to shut the light off from his electric candle.

Then he moved away from the niche in the wall where the cupboard had been built in and waited. His greatest fear was that Frank would turn about and show his light, and so expose them both to danger. While he listened, almost holding his breath, the steps came nearer to the cupboard and halted.

But the halt was only for an instant, for the unseen figure moved on again, this time back toward the entrance. Directly the footsteps were heard no more, and then the crash of falling rocks reached the boy's ears. He did not have to think long in order to understand what that sound portended.

He knew that they had been observed by some of the outlaws who made the cavern their home and their storehouse as well, had been followed into the inner chamber, and were now to be fastened into the cavern, probably left there to starve, with tons of rock bulking before the entrance to the third chamber. It was not a pleasant situation.

While he studied the peril over in as optimistic a mood as was possible under the circumstances, he heard Frank calling to him from the narrow tunnel behind the cupboard. The boy was evidently excited, for his voice rang high.

"Ned!" he cried. "Come on in!"

The noise of falling, rolling rocks stopped at the sound of Frank's voice, and Ned thought he heard a half-suppressed chuckle in the darkness.

"Hurry!" came Frank's voice once more. "There's something in here that takes the nerve out of me."

There was a low exclamation of rage at the entrance, where the stones were piling up, and then the grind of falling rocks was continued. Ned had, of course, no idea as to how many persons were engaged in building up the wall which threatened to shut him in until life was extinct, or exactly how it was being done, but he knew that the correct thing for him to do was to prevent the completion of the work.

If only one man had arrived at the cavern he might be frightened and driven away by a little shooting. With bullets whizzing through what was left of the opening, the man who was building the crude wall would not be likely to present his body before the space still uncovered. This reasoning brought the boy to a consideration of the matter of ammunition, but he decided that, with the cartridges carried by Frank, they could defend the place for a long time.

But another question intervened. The rocks which, though unseen, he knew to be blocking the space where the rug had hung were undoubtedly falling from a distance. They might have been stored above the natural doorway for the very purpose to which they were now being put.

If this were true, then the building of the trap would continue, regardless of his bullets.

While he studied over this problem, slowly making up his mind to put it to the test, Frank's voice came from the tunnel again.

"What's doing out there?" the boy asked. "Why don't you come in here?"

"Shut off your light!" ordered Ned, as a glimmer showed inside.

"Not me," replied Frank. "I need all the light I can get in here!"

"What have you found?" asked Ned anxiously.

Frank did not reply instantly, and Ned heard the rattle of stones while he waited for his answer. The task of piling up the wall was progressing rapidly, and it seemed to the boy that the stones were all falling from a distance.

"Shut off your light and come out," Ned said, impatient at the hesitation.

"I wouldn't stay here in the dark for a thousand dollars a second," Frank replied, "but I'll come out. Why don't you show a light?"

"I'm not looking for any chance bullets," Ned replied, coolly. "We're caught, my boy, and it is up to us to move cautiously. Why don't you turn off your light?" he added, half angrily.

"Oh," Frank replied, "you're getting it out there, too, are you? Well, I was trying to save

you a shock. There's a dead man in here, and I'm going to keep my light going until I'm out of the hole. I did shut it off once, and felt the grasp of a hand on my neck—and there wasn't any hand there either."

"A dead man?" repeated Ned.

"Sure," Frank replied. "And he's not been dead very long, at that."

Again the boy heard that vicious chuckle at the entrance. Then a voice came out of the mouldy darkness:

"How are you getting on in the Secret Service, Ned Nestor?" the voice asked.

"Finely!" Ned called back, but it seemed to him that his voice shook with the peril of the situation. He was known, his mission there was no secret, the enemies of the government were already on the ground, ready to combat him in his work. Just how far their hostility would extend was evidenced by the fall of rocks outside. It seemed to the boy that the struggle would be to the death.

"Who are you talking to?" Frank asked.

Ned did not reply to the question, for there came the sound of a scuffle outside, then a shot, a cry of pain, and the cavern was still as a grave.

In the silence Frank's movements were heard, and Ned knew that he was backing out of the tunnel, with his light still burning. Entirely at a loss to account for the fracas outside, Ned awaited his approach with a fast-beating heart. When at last he shut off his electric searchlight and dropped from the tunnel through the old cupboard Ned seized his hand and drew him away.

"Did you fire that shot?" Frank whispered.

"No," was the reply. "There's fighting outside, and the shot was fired there. Now, I had a notion of sending a stream of bullets through the doorway, but the persons who are fighting the man who came upon us here may be our friends, so we must be careful what we do. Here. Take my flashlight. Open the two at the same instant and turn the rays on the doorway. I'll be ready with my gun."

But before this movement could be carried out a voice the boys knew came out of the darkness.

"Wonder you wouldn't give a fellow a lift," Jimmie said, in a panting tone. "I've got to the limit with this big stiff."

The lights were on instantly, with Ned and Frank bounding toward the opening. The way

was narrow, for many rocks had been dropped down from a broad ledge just above, but they managed to crawl through. But before Ned could reach the struggling pair on the floor the under figure wiggled away, staggered for an instant, and then made for the outer air at good speed.

Jimmie sat upon the stone floor with a disgusted look on his freckled face.

"Now see what you've been an' gone an' done!" he cried. "You've let me pirate get away! But he took a bullet with him," he added.

"How many were here?" asked Ned, shutting off his light and telling Frank to do the same. "How many men did you see?"

"Just that one," Jimmie replied, sorrowfully, "an' he got away!"

Ned advanced to the entrance and listened. At first he heard the sound of limping footsteps, then the sweep of oars. He ran down to the beach and swept his light over the waters of the lake. A slender boat was speeding far to the north, and a solitary rower was bending to his work.

Now, for the first time, Ned noted that a fierce gale was blowing from the west, and his

thoughts went back to the plateau where the aeroplane lay exposed to the storm. He ran back to the cavern, barely escaping being blown off his feet on the way, and called to the boys.

"There's a stiff wind blowing," he said, "and I'm afraid for the aeroplane. We must get back to the camp immediately."

"The wind was on when I came in," Jimmie said, "an' it near blew me into the lake, even if I did hold on to the trees. We can never make the hill in the storm."

"We've got to," Ned insisted.

"Besides," Jimmie continued, "we want to find out about the dead man Frank has been telling me about. We can't take him with us, an' he will not be here when we come back. Whatever we learn about him, an' the cause of his death, must be learned now."

"Sometimes, Jimmie," Frank burst out, "you exhibit signs of almost human intelligence!"

"The boy is right," Ned observed. "I'm so rattled that I hardly know what I'm about. We ought to be in pursuit of that rascal who is rowing on the lake, we ought to be on the plateau, looking after the aeroplane, and we ought to be here, finding out if a murder has been committed."

"It is a murder, all right," Frank said, "for the floor in the tunnel is sticky with blood."

"I'm goin' in there!" Jimmie exclaimed.

"Go if you want to," Frank grunted.

Ned laid a hand on Jimmie's arm as he started away.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'd much rather you remained on guard. You have keen eyes, and may be of great service here."

"All right!" the boy said. "I'll do anything you ask me to if you don't leave me out of the game."

"No danger of your getting into the dust heap," Frank laughed. "How long have you been prowling about here?"

"Just a short time," was the reply. "I remained in the tent until I thought Pat an' Jack were asleep an' then cut my lucky. Say, but the wind was blowin' when I slid down the slope toward the lake."

"It must be fierce up on the plateau," Frank admitted. "Say," he added, turning to Ned, "if you don't mind, I'll go on up the hill and help the boys with the aeroplane. It would be a tragedy if it should be destroyed now."

"All right," Ned said. "Get up there as soon as possible. The boys may be having

trouble with the 'plane. And Jimmie," he added, "suppose you keep an eye on the plateau? The lads may signal."

"Too dark for that," the boy replied, "but I'll keep a sharp lookout, just the same. Go on and look over the man Frank found under the mountain."

Frank moved on up the hill, clinging to trees as he advanced, and stooping low, even then, to escape the force of the wind, while Jimmie stationed himself in the opening and looked out on the lake. Ned disappeared in the cavern, and the boy saw his torch grow fainter as he climbed through the narrow opening left in the rock which had been thrown over the natural doorway.

It was getting late and the boy was sleepy, but he struggled manfully to keep his eyes open. Directly, however, he had no trouble in this regard, for he started up with a strange, acrid odor in his nostrils. The low-lying sky was aflame.

CHAPTER VI.

ABOVE THE CLOUDS AT NIGHT.

The wind gained strength as the heat of the forest fires increased. The roaring of the gale and the heavy undertone of the racing flames effectually drowned the voice of the forester, and it was only by the motion of his lips that the boys knew that he was trying to talk to them.

Presently he threw his hands high above his head, weaponless, then lowered one and beckoned to them. Still keeping grasp on their revolvers, the boys approached him. His face was deadly pale, save for the glow of the fire which shone unnaturally on the wall behind him.

"This is no time for accusations," he shouted. "We must do something to check the fire."

"What is to be done?" Jack demanded, half won over by the apparent distress of the fellow.

"The blaze will burn itself out against the mountains," was the reply, shouted at the top of the speaker's lungs, "but the fire in the cañon must be checked by going on ahead and felling trees."

"Won't it burn itself out there, too?" asked Pat.

"I'm afraid not," was the shrill reply. "There is an opening from the top of the cañon to a valley in a fold of the hills. The fire will do incalculable damage if it passes through that."

"What do you suppose we can do against a fire like that?" demanded Pat. "An army could not stop the blaze now."

"You are mistaken!" shrilled the other. "Three choppers can clear a space which the fire will not cross."

"We'll get our axes and try," Jack said, reluctantly.

"Then make haste!" Greer shouted. "At all events we must leave this place, for the fire will soon be here. Come!"

When the boys turned to verify this statement they saw that the planes of the aeroplane were red with the reflection of the blaze below, and that the creeping fire was already showing at the lip of the plateau.

"The aeroplane is doomed, I guess," wailed Jack, and Pat thought he saw a look of satisfaction in Greer's face as the words reached his ears.

The smoke was now rolling over the plateau in great clouds, but through it Pat thought he saw figures moving from the south slope toward the aeroplane. Calling out to Jack, he sprang toward the machine, the suspicion in his mind that these were confederates of the alleged forester, and that the machine was, after all, the main point of attack.

Greer saw the movement and darted toward the boy as if to block his way, but Pat struck out viciously and turned him back. Then a bit of flame sprang up in the cloud of smoke which was sweeping over the plateau. It seemed to Pat that an attempt to burn the machine in advance of the arrival of the forest fire was being made.

When he darted forward again Greer caught him by the shoulder and hurled him away.

"Get your axes!" he shouted. "There is no time to waste here."

Then the smoke lifted for an instant and Pat saw three figures rise above the rim of the northern slope and hasten toward the aeroplane. Their arrival there was followed by shots and calls for assistance. Then the smoke shut down again, and the roaring of the flames drowned all other sounds.

Greer stood for an instant, braced against the wind, shielding his face from the hot blasts scorching the grass of the plateau, then turned and ran. Then both boys heard a call from the direction of the machine.

"The way is clear to the cavern!" were the words they heard. "Remain there until we return!"

"That's Ned," shouted Pat. "Just in time to save the aeroplane."

Almost before the words were out of his mouth there came a lull in the wind and the great machine ran forward a few yards, then swung into the air. At that moment Frank came running toward the two astonished boys.

"We've got to leg it!" Frank shouted, his mouth close to Jack's ear. "Drop low on the ground so as to get fresh air and run!"

Jack, although he had heard Ned's voice giving directions, and although he knew that Frank was by his side, could hardly sense the situation, or all that had taken place. The action had been so swift that he could not yet realize that Ned had snatched the aeroplane away from certain destruction and lifted it into the stormy sky in so short a time.

However, he did not stop then to place the events in neat order in his mind, for the fire was working across the scant vegetation of the plateau and the air was hot and stifling. It was all like a page out of the Arabian Nights, but he put the wonder of it away, grasped Frank's hand, and, crouching, ran toward the incline leading to the lake. There was safety there, at least.

Now and then, in their swift flight, the boys stopped and looked upward, hoping to learn something of the fate of the aeroplane, but the great machine was not in sight.

"Ned never can make it live in this gale!" Jack almost sobbed, when, at last, they all came to a halt at the margin of the lake. "The whole shebang will go to pieces and the boys will be killed."

"Aw, forget it!" grunted Pat. "I'm not in love with airships, but I know that Ned wouldn't have gone up unless he knew that he could handle the machine. He'll lift above the divide and drive straight before the wind. The good Lord only knows how far the gale will take him, but I'm betting my head against turnips that he'll come back by morning, asking why breakfast isn't ready!"

"How did you get wise to the trouble up here?" Jack asked of Frank.

"Why, I don't exactly know," the boy replied. "Ned sent me on ahead to look out for the aeroplane. He said he wanted to remain in the cavern and investigate. I was making slow progress up the hill when Ned and Jimmie came running after me. I had noticed long before that the sky looked like fires were burning somewhere."

"I should say so," Pat cut in. "The clouds looked like they had been soaked in red paint."

"When Ned came up to me, running like a racehorse," Frank went on, "he said he was going to take the aeroplane out, wind or no wind. I didn't have much chance to talk with him, but I understood that he was going to do just what Pat has suggested—run before the wind and swing back whenever he could."

"I presume Jimmie is good and scared by this time!" Jack commented.

"When we got to the machine," Frank went on, "we found two men there with some sort of torches in their hands, trying to set the machine on fire. We caught them unawares and left them lying there. I hope they didn't get burned to death."

There was a short cessation of speech while the boys listened to the roaring of the flames and watched the fire mounting into the sky. It was a wild scene—one calculated to bring terror to the breast of any human being. The wind was dying down a little, but the clouds were still driving fast before it, their edges tinged with flame so that they resembled golden masses floating across an eternity of space clothed in smoke.

While the boys watched the great display Frank pointed to a wall of flame rounding the corner of the plateau.

"The fire will burn this slope," he said, and we've either got to get into the cave or out on the lake. Which shall it be?"

"The cave for mine!" Jack cried.

"And mine," echoed Pat. "Who knows what the fire will do to the lake?"

But Frank had had previous experience in the cavern. He was thinking of the still figure he had found lying there, and of the dark stains on the floor.

"If we could find a boat," he said, without mentioning his real reason for objecting to the cave, "we might get along very well on the lake. We don't know what stifling air we shall find in

the cave, and, besides, the men we have just had a fracas with may return at any time. It wouldn't be nice to be locked up in that hole in the ground."

The wind was dying down to a steady breeze, and the fires seemed to burn lower. The clouds above were dark and threatening, save where gilded by the reflection from below, and seemed to be massing. Frank held up a hand and shouted.

"Rain!" he cried. "Rain!"

It was no gentle spring shower that opened upon the earth then. The fountains of the great deep seemed to have opened wide. The water fell in sheets, and in an instant the boys were wet to the skin.

"Better than fire!" Jack suggested.

The rain pelted down upon the forest fires viciously, and the hissing protests of the angry embers rose in the air. Through the thick veil of the rain clouds of steam could be seen rolling over the lake and along the threatened incline. In ten minutes water was pouring down the steep hill in sheets and the fires were leaping no more.

Pleased as the boys were at the opportune arrival of the rain-bearing clouds, they could not

help wondering if the freak of chance which had preserved the forests of northern Montana had not brought Ned and Jimmie sudden death.

"They never can handle the machine in such an air-ocean," Jack declared, but the more optimistic Pat asserted that Ned must have been a mile above the rain clouds before a drop of water fell.

"I guess the fire brought this rain on," Frank said, wiggling about in his wet garments, "but it's just as wet as if brought about by some other means. What are we going to do now?"

"Why not go to the cave until the rain stops?" asked Pat.

"It is colder in there than it is here," Frank said, still thinking of the silent figure in the narrow tunnel back of the cupboard.

"We can't get any more water in our clothes and hides than we have now," Jack observed, "so we may as well stay outside and watch for Ned and the aeroplane. I don't believe any other person ever took an aeroplane up in such a storm. I'm afraid Ned was smashed against the divide."

"Ned's all right," insisted Frank. "Suppose we go back to the plateau and see if there's anything left of our tents."

"I'm game for that," Pat said, "but," he added, turning a keen gaze on Frank, "I'd like to know why you object to going to the cave. Jack and I would like to see it."

"Well," Frank replied, not without some hesitation at bringing the scene in the tunnel back to his mind in form for expression in words, "there's a crime been committed in the cave, and it's uncanny."

"A crime!" repeated Pat, all excitement at the suggestion of another adventure, "what kind of a crime?"

"A murder," replied Frank, with a shiver.

"Let's go in and see," Pat said.

"Frank's afraid," Jack put in.

"Of course I'm afraid," Frank admitted. "You go in there, and crawl on your knees through the thick air of a narrow tunnel, and put your hand on a dead man's face, and feel your other hand slipping in the blood on the floor, and you'll be afraid, too. I'm not going back there."

"We can stand here in the rain all night, if you want to," Pat said, with scorn in his voice. "Rainwater is said to be good for the complexion."

The wind was slowing down and the rainfall was not so heavy as before. The boys, Pat and Jack, joking Frank about his terror for the cave, and Frank just a little angry, began the ascent of the slope leading to the plateau.

"The rain saved the trees next to the mountain," Pat said, presently, "and if it checked the fire on the plateau at the same line our tents are all right. Say," he added, "who ever heard of such a downpour as that. I reckon the rain swept in from the ocean in heavy clouds which were broken open by the mountains."

"Much you know about it!" laughed Jack. "You talk as if you could cut a cloud with a knife."

"Anyway," persisted Pat, "the water tumbled out and checked the fires. Wonder what became of the man who said his name was Greer? He was standing in with the men who were trying to burn the aeroplane, all right enough, and I believe the whole circus was started just to destroy the airship and bring Ned's investigations to a close."

"We always do get into the thick of it at the first jump," Frank said, remembering the bomb under the cottage in the Canal Zone and the

raid on the nipa hut in the Philippines. "Whenever we've got anything coming to us, we get it by lightning express."

"You bet we do!" Jack exclaimed. "Now we're getting a clear sky," he added, pointing upward, "and we're getting it short order time, too!"

The heavy clouds were gone, the moon was smiling down on the drenched earth, the stars were winking significantly toward a spot on the plateau where two unrecognizable figures, half burned away, were lying. When the boys reached the top of the climb and advanced to the spot where the aeroplane had stood they turned sick with the horror of the thing.

"I almost wish we had let them destroy the aeroplane," sighed Frank. "I don't like to think that these men came to their death through us. It is awful!"

"Did you shoot them?" asked Pat.

Frank shook his head.

"They shot at us," he said. "They fired as soon as we got to the rim of the dip, but missed because of the smoke and the wind. Then we rushed them, and they went down—to escape punishment, I thought—and so Ned got the aeroplane away."

"Then you had nothing to do with their death," consoled Pat. "They came here to commit a crime and were overcome by the smoke and heat."

Frank would gladly have accepted this version of what had taken place, but he could not bring his mind to do so at once. The horror of what he had found in the cave was still upon him.

Leaving the spot where what remained of the outlaws lay, the boys hastened to the wall of rock which terminated the plateau on the east. The rain had indeed saved the tents from destruction. The canvas was huddled against the wall, stained with smoke and heavy with rain, but in fairly good condition.

"We'll have to remain here, or about here, until Ned comes," Pat said, "so we may as well put the tents up. I wonder if it isn't most morning?"

"Does that mean that you are getting hungry?" grinned Jack.

"You bet it does!" was the reply. "Anyway, I'm going to see if I can find dry wood enough for a fire. If I can I'll make some hot coffee. Ned will see the fire, and know we are not in the cave."

Then an exclamation from Frank called the speaker's attention to the clear sky over the divide. The upper strata of clouds were drifting westward on a high current of air—what few clouds there were—and far up in the blue, the moonlight trimming the planes with silver, rode the aeroplane, seemingly intact, and working back on the high current toward the Pacific coast.

CHAPTER VII.

A KEY WITH A BROKEN STEM.

The lights were burning low in a bachelor flat on a noisy street corner in the city of San Francisco, and a man of perhaps thirty lay on a couch with his eyes closed. There were in this sitting room, which faced one of the noisy streets, a grand piano, a costly music cabinet, a walnut bookcase filled with expensively bound volumes, numerous lazy chairs of leather, and the rug on the polished floor was rich and soft. The occupant of the flat evidently enjoyed luxurious things and had the money to pay for them.

When a clock in a distant steeple struck midnight there came a knock at the locked door in the main corridor which connected with the private hallway on which the flat opened. A Japanese servant, small, obsequious, keen-eyed, opened the door, after the hesitation of a moment, and peeked out. He would have closed it again instantly, seeing a stranger there, only Ned Nestor, who had anticipated some action

of the kind, thrust a shoe into the opening, and, reaching in, unfastened the chain.

"I wish to see Mr. Albert Lemon," he said.

The Jap tried to force the door back and lock it, but was unsuccessful.

"No savvy!" he cried, as Ned brushed past him and stood in the private hall.

Ned paid no further attention to him, but entered the sitting room and at once advanced to the couch where the man lay. The figure on the couch did not move, but the Jap forced himself in the boy's way with his cry of "no savvy!"

"Opium?" Ned asked, pointing down to the man.

"No savvy!"

"Hit the pipe?" he asked, putting the question in a new way.

"No savvy! No savvy!"

"Dope, then?" Ned went on. "Tell me if this man has been doping himself into unconsciousness. Dope, eh?"

Ned lifted his voice, half hoping that the man on the couch would show some signs of life, but there was no movement of the eyelids.

"No savvy!" grunted the Jap.

Ned took the servant by his shoulders, pushed him gently out of the room, and closed

and locked the door, the key being in the lock on the inside.

"No savvy! No savvy!"

The words came through the thin panel of the door in quick succession for a minute and then silence. Again Ned advanced to the side of the couch and looked down upon the semi-unconscious man.

It was clear to the boy that the fellow sensed what was taking place, but was too well satisfied with the drugged condition in which he lay to disturb his poise of mind by taking note of anything whatever. The figure of the fellow was dressed in expensive clothes of latest cut, but they were soiled, and even torn in places.

The disreputable condition of the garments reminded Ned of a suit in which he had once been hauled through a briar patch and pulled into a pond at the hands, or horns, rather, of a village cow, assisted by a rope. His clothes, it is true, had not been expensive ones at the time of the occurrence, but the looks of the clothes the drugged man wore reminded him of the damage his cheaper ones had sustained.

The face of the man on the couch was deadly pale, with the drawn look about the skin which comes of much familiarity with the drug made

of the poppy. It was still an attractive face, even in its degradation, and the forehead was that of a capable man.

Ned drew a chair to the side of the couch and sat down. Even if he should at that time succeed in attracting the attention of the man, the fellow was in no condition to answer the important questions he was there to ask.

Presently the Jap, or some one else, came and rapped lightly on the door, and Ned opened it a trifle and looked out.

"No savvy!" cried the Jap, repeating the words like a parrot, standing in the hall with many signs of fright on his yellow face.

"All right!" Ned said, shutting the door in his face, "you don't have to."

"I can't blame him for thinking this a cheeky invasion," Ned smiled, as he returned to his chair at the side of the couch. "It isn't exactly the thing to walk into a man's private room in this manner."

Ned had decided to sit by the side of the half conscious man until he returned to his full mentality. Questions now might produce only pipe dreams, for the imagination is rather too active under such circumstances.

Five days before Ned had left the boys in a cup on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains, not far from the summit, after explaining to them that he was going to the city to investigate a clue connected with the murder of the man who had been found in the cavern. Leaving the aeroplane safely hidden at Missoula, he had traveled by rail to San Francisco.

In his handbag on this trip were two seemingly unimportant articles—a piece of tape cut from the inner side of the collar of the dead man's coat, and a small, odd-shaped key with the stem broken off so that it was only about an inch in length. The key had been the only article found in the dead man's pockets. The strip of tape bore the name of a San Francisco tailor.

The directory had assisted him in finding the tailor, and the tailor had informed him that the coat had been made for one Albert Lemon, whose address he gave. So here he was, in Lemon's apartment, seeking information concerning the dead man, while Lemon, supposedly Lemon, lay in an opium daze on the couch.

But Ned's time, waiting for the man to come back to consciousness, was not all wasted. Moving carefully about the room, he found that the broken key fitted a writing desk which stood

between two windows. The lock which it fitted, however, was not in good condition, for the bolt had been pried back, damaging the polished edge of the casing which held the socket. The desk contained nothing of importance, and Ned left it as he found it.

Sitting there in the soft light of the room, he did not know whether the man on the couch was Albert Lemon or whether the man who had died in the cavern was Albert Lemon. He believed, however, that the outlaws he had encountered in the mountains, had murdered the man, and felt that the surest way to trace the crime to them was to find out why the man had joined them—why he was there in the tunnel back of the cupboard. This would be likely to bring out a motive for the deed.

He did not, of course, know whether the dead man had stood as an enemy to the outlaws, or whether he had stood as a friend. But that could make no difference with the quest he was on. He believed that the outlaws were the men he had been instructed to hunt down, and knew that proof could be obtained only by an intimate knowledge of their associations, their ways, their motives. The friends of the dead man he thought, would know something about them,

perhaps be able to place them in the circle in which they lived when not in the hills.

In work of this kind it is the first task of an investigator to "place" the man he is pursuing. The burglar is as good as taken when he is traced back to those he associates with in his hours of leisure. In the absence of a clue pointing to a person, the investigator busies himself in finding a motive. Ned believed that he now had the personal clue. The motive would place the proof in his hands.

So his Secret Service work for the government was leading him into the investigation of a murder mystery. He smiled as he held up the key and wondered if the facts when discovered would bear out the suspicions in his mind. Again he asked himself the question:

"Is this Albert Lemon, or was the dead man Albert Lemon?"

After a long time the man on the couch opened his eyes and looked about the room. His glance rested for an instant on the figure in the chair at his side, but the fact of its being there did not appear to surprise him in the least.

"Jap!" he called faintly.

There was a sound at the door, but it was still locked, and the servant was unable to obey the summons.

"Bring me a pipe!" were the next words.

The Jap clamored at the door, but did not gain admission. The racket seemed to disturb the man not at all.

"I think," Ned said, "that you have had all the dope you need to-night. Besides, I want you to answer a few questions."

"Perhaps I have," the man said, but, supposing that to be the case, where do you come in? You are a new one on me, and I hope you won't flop out of a window or go up through the roof, as some of the others have done. I want to have congenial company to-night. Who are you?"

"Ned Nestor," was the quiet reply.

"So," said the man on the couch. "I've heard of you—read about you and the Canal Zone in the newspapers. But you're only a kid. What about that?"

"I can't help being young," laughed Ned. "Anyway, that is a fault I'll soon get over. We all have it at first."

"And get over it too quickly," said the other, with a sigh. "Well, what do you want here?"

"Are you Albert Lemon?" asked Ned abruptly.

"Yes," was the reply, "I'm Albert Lemon. What about it?"

The man was gaining mental strength every moment now, and seemed to sense the strange situation.

"Stiles is your tailor?" the boy went on.

"Look here," said the other, rising to a sitting position and passing a shaking hand across his brow, as if to brush away the fancies of the poppy, "when you convince me that you have a laudable interest in my personal affairs I'll be glad to answer your questions."

Ned took the strip of tape from his pocket and held it out to the man on the couch.

"Do you recognize that?" he asked.

Lemon nodded coolly, but a look of wonder and alarm was growing in his bloodshot eyes, and his jaw dropped a trifle.

"I still lack the proof of laudable interest," he said, with a twisting of the face intended for a smile.

"Answer the question," Ned replied, "and I'll inform you of my interest in this article—and in you."

"Yes, I recognize it as the private mark of Stiles, my tailor," Lemon answered, in a moment. "Where did you get it? If you insist on asking personal questions I must insist on the right to do the same thing."

"I cut this private mark," Ned said, "from the collar of a coat found on the back of a dead man in Montana, somewhere near the main divide of the Rocky Mountains. Do you know how it came there?"

"Yes and no," was the reply.

"Kindly answer the affirmative proposition first," Ned said, with a smile.

"Well," said the other, "about three months ago an old college friend of mine, one Felix Emory, came to me from Boston. He was in bad with his people, and was out of money. I took him in here and tried to brace him up. I couldn't do it. His moral stamina was gone."

Lemon paused a moment, and, with a deprecatory smile, pointed to an opium pipe which lay on the rug near the couch.

"I understand," Ned said.

"I fed him, and clothed him, and introduced him at the club, and gave him every chance in the world to get a brace, but he fought me off. All he cared for was a pipe and a pill and a place to sleep it off."

"And so you gave him up as a bad proposition?" asked Ned.

"Not exactly. He wanted to go to the mountains on a hunting trip. Well, I thought it would

benefit his health, so I rigged up an outfit for his use and let him go. You say the man was dead?"

"Quite dead," Ned replied.

"Too much poppy, I presume?" Lemon asked with an ashamed smile.

"Too much steel," Ned answered, sharply.

Lemon stared at the boy for an instant, his eyes more anxious than ever, and arose shakingly to his feet.

"Do you mean that he was murdered?" he asked.

Ned nodded.

"Where?" was the next question.

"I found the body in a cavern on the western slope of the Rockies," was the reply. "He had been dead only a few hours."

Albert Lemon maintained a thoughtful silence for a time, during which Ned eyed his changing expression keenly.

"And what do you wish me to do about it?" he then asked.

"A crime has been committed," Ned replied, "and it seems to me that you ought to do all in your power to assist in bringing the criminal to punishment."

"Granted, sir. Tell me what to do."

"First, tell me about the men your friend went away with."

"That brings me to the negative proposition," the other answered. "I have told you how Felix came by my coat, but I can't tell you whether the man the coat was found on was Felix. You must see that for yourself. He might have given the garment away, or he might have sold it in the city to get money for opium. In short, the coat might have been on the body of a man I never saw."

"Then you can't tell me who Emory went away with?" asked Ned.

"Certainly not," was the reply. "I don't know whether he went away at all or not."

This was disappointing, but Ned had one more lever with which the man's indifference might be lifted, he thought. Before speaking again Lemon arose and turned the key in the lock of the door, against which the servant was still pounding. The Jap entered and stood by the door, looking intently at Ned.

"When you gave him the suit of clothes he went away in," the boy went on, shifting his position so that both men would be under his eyes, "what articles, if any, remained in the pockets?"

"Not a thing," was the reply. "I looked out for that."

"Then anything discovered in the pockets of the dead man," Ned said, taking the key from his pocket and toying carelessly with it, "must have belonged to him?"

Ned saw Lemon give a quick start at sight of the key. The Jap advanced a step as if to get a closer view of it. Then both men turned their eyes for an instant to the broken lock of the writing desk. Ned had gained his point. The men recognized the key.

"Where is the body you speak of?" Lemon asked, presently.

"Buried near the cavern in the mountains," was the reply.

"Perhaps you can give me a description of the body," Lemon said. "I might be able to say, then, whether the man was Felix."

"Look in the mirror," Ned replied, "and you will see there a fairly good representation of the dead man. About the same in height, in size, and, yes, in feature."

"Then it must have been Felix," the other said. "His remarkable resemblance to myself has often been remarked. Poor fellow! I'm sorry that his end should come in so ghastly a form."

There was a short silence, during which Lemon's eyes flitted from the key in Ned's fingers to the writing desk.

"I said a moment ago," he observed then, "that I searched the pockets of the clothes before I gave them to him, or words to that effect. I remember now that I ordered Jap to do it. Did you obey orders?" he asked, turning to the servant.

Ned saw the Jap give a quick start, then regain control of himself. Lemon, too, looked crestfallen for a moment, then addressed the Jap in another tongue.

"I was talking in English," he said, "and forgot for the moment that he would not understand me."

There followed a short conversation between the two, and then Lemon announced that the Jap had forgotten to look in the pockets of the clothes. Ned ignored the explanation and put the key in his pocket. He knew now that the Jap could understand English, and also that the key belonged to Albert Lemon, alive or dead.

Lemon arose and, going to a table, secured a tobacco pouch and a book of cigaret papers. As he rolled a cigaret Ned observed that the middle finger of his left hand carried, just be-

low the nail, a blue spot, as if he had been using a typewriter since cleaning his hands. Ned noticed it particularly, as he himself used a double keyboard machine and usually smutted that finger on the ribbon when he rolled the platen.

"Well," Lemon said, "I'll have to ask you to excuse me now. I've been off on a long country tramp. You see how mussed up I am. I think I crawled through briar patches and wire fences and fell into cow ponds."

Ned turned away without a word, with plenty of food for thought in his mind.

CHAPTER VIII.

FATE OF THE STEAK A LA BRIGAND.

Jimmie lay stretched at full length under one of the discolored shelter tents in a little cup in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Frank and Pat and Jack were moving restlessly about, looking up at the blue sky expectantly. Ned had not returned from his trip to San Francisco, and the boys were anxious as to his safety.

"He should have taken me with him," Jimmie drawled, presently, when Frank threw himself down by the tent. "Then he'd have been all right."

"It is a wonder that he got along in the world at all before he fell under your protecting care," Frank replied, with a grin.

"Oh, he managed in some way," Jimmie answered, "but he never got up in the world until he took me into partnership," with a wink at his chum.

"He's been up in the world since then, all right," Frank said, suggestively.

"Too high up," Jimmie grinned. "Too high up for me, anyway. I thought I'd die up there, on the night of the fire."

"In all the history of air navigation," Frank observed, soberly, "there was never a trip like that. When I think of the quick start, and the wind and the rain, the whole thing seems like a dream. How did he ever do it?"

"I don't know," Jimmie replied. "He boosted me into the seat, and the next I knew we were off, an' the fire was dropping away from us, an' the mountains were growing smaller, an' the peaks looked like warts on the world. I felt like I was fallin' over the edge of somethin'."

"And the wind?" questioned Frank. "Didn't it take your breath away?"

"Wind, nothin'," the boy said, scornfully. "There wasn't any wind where we were. We went along with it. It was like sailin' on a swift stream. Ned tuned the engine up to keep steerway, an' shut his teeth. Then, in half a minute, we were above the clouds, an' the moon an' stars were askin' what we were doin' up there."

"You're saying it well," Pat said, joining the little group. "If you were going so merrily before the wind, why did he want steerway?"

"You don't know much about the atmosphere," laughed Frank, answering for Jimmie. "If you did, you'd know that the air blanket of the earth is a good deal like a river. It has eddies, and currents, and ripples, and holes, too."

"You're good, too!" exclaimed Pat. "Holes in the air is about the best I ever heard!"

"Of course there are holes in the air," Frank replied, with the air of one imparting valuable information, "especially when there are fires beneath. And, let me tell you this, you old redhead," he added, with an exasperating grin, "when the air, driven swiftly by the wind, or what we call the wind, comes to mountain peaks, and tall trees, and sky-scrapers, it just backs up, just the same as water does when it comes to a dam, or any obstruction."

"Go it!" Pat cried. "Make it a good one! Where does this air go when it backs up?"

"It just hunches up," Frank replied, gravely, "and checks the flow back of it, and then eddies and swirls away, fit to twist an aeroplane into kindling wood."

"Of course," broke in Jimmie. "I've often read of aeroplanes dropping a thousand feet into holes in the air, and of their being swept against tall trees and buildings by eddies. It takes a

cool head to run an air machine in a storm of wind, and that is where Ned won out."

"If he hadn't kept the aeroplane going with the wind at full speed," Frank added, "he would have been in a wreck the first half mile."

"The more I learn about the atmosphere," Pat said, "the less I like it. When you get me up in an aeroplane, just send word to the folks that I'm tired of life."

"Ned ought to have a Carnegie medal for what he did that night," Jack remarked, "and I'm going to speak to father about it when I get home."

"There is no doubt that he ought to have one," Frank said, "but the men who really deserve Carnegie medals never get them."

"You're an anarchist!" roared Pat.

"All right," was the sober reply, "but if I had the giving out of the medals I'd present them to men who work twelve hours a day and provide for families of eight on nine dollars a week—the men who never get rested, and who never have enough to eat. They are the ones who ought to have the medals."

"Most of them would sell the medals," Jack said, cynically.

"Well," Frank replied, "I shouldn't blame them if they did. I'd rather have a porterhouse steak in the interior than a piece of bronze on the outside."

"Don't talk about porterhouse steak!" pleaded Jimmie.

"Hungry, little man?" asked Pat.

"Hungry! I'm like one of the men Frank has been telling about. I never get rested, never have enough to eat."

The boys fell upon Jimmie and rolled him out of the tent.

"You get busy with fuel," Pat said, after they had given him plenty of "movements," "and I'll cook a steak à la brigand."

"We ain't got no steak," complained Jimmie.

"We've got potatoes, and bacon, and onions," Pat said, "and canned beefsteak. You just watch me. I used to cook steak à la brigand in the Philippines."

"Get busy, then," Jimmie said, "and Jack will help get the green wood."

"If you bring green wood here for me to cook with, I'll roast you over it," Pat said. "You get a lot of good dry wood that will make coals, and I'll show you how to broil a steak à la brigand."

"Why do you call it a brigand steak?" asked Jimmie.

"Because it takes a red-headed brigand to cook it," suggested Jack, dodging out of Pat's reach.

"Never you mind the name," Pat replied. "Get the dry wood and I'll broil a steak that will melt in the mouth."

"That old canned stuff?" asked Frank.

"Get the wood," ordered Pat, "and I'll show you."

There were a few dead trees—the sole reminders of a former forest fire in that green valley—close at hand, and the wood was soon gathered and placed in a great pile near two rocks which Pat had rolled to within a yard of each other.

"Here!" Jack called out, as Pat transferred the whole supply to the space between the stones, "there's enough fuel there for a week's cooking. Quit it!"

"My son," Pat replied, with a provoking air of patronage, "what you don't know about broiling a steak à la brigand would make a congressional library."

While the wood was burning down to coals, Pat cut a green slip about an inch in diameter at the bottom and peeled and smoothed it nicely.

"Is that to be used to enforce the eating of the steak?" asked Frank, winking at the others.

"To keep you from gorging yourselves," Pat replied, going on with his work.

In a short time he had the potatoes cut into half-inch slices. Jack had peeled them and, following directions with many grins, had also cut a round hole an inch in size in the middle of each slice.

"He's going to wear 'em around his neck, like beads," Jimmie suggested, looking carefully over the heaped-up dish.

The bacon was now sliced thin, as were the onions, and in the center of each slice a round hole was made. Then Pat opened a couple of tins of beefsteak—so called by the packers—and cut a hole in the middle of each slice. Then he strung a slice of potato on the spit, then a slice of bacon, then a slice of onion, then a slice of beef, until there was nearly a yard of provisions.

"I begin to feel hungrier than ever!"

Jimmie was dancing around the fire as Pat turned the spit. There were only coals now, and Pat kept the toothsome collection turning slowly, so as to broil without scorching. The smell of the cooking bacon and onions set the

boys to getting out the tin plates and making the coffee.

The sun, which had been shining fiercely all day, now seemed to be working his way through a mist. The atmosphere appeared to be tinted with the yellow haze one sees in the northern states in autumn.

As the boys were keeping watch for Ned and the aeroplane, they noticed the change in atmospheric conditions, but attributed it to the rising vapor brought out by the heat of the sun.

"Say," Jimmie said, presently, "I smell smoke. I wonder if there's goin' to be another forest blaze here?"

"Of course you smell smoke," Jack said, watching the broiling supper. "We're cooking a steak à la brigand, ain't we?"

"Smells like burnin' leaves," Jimmie insisted.

"More like onions," Pat observed.

The boys crouched about the fire for some moments longer and then Jimmie arose and began to climb the wall of the cup to the west.

"I'm goin' to see about this," he said.

Frank laid a hand on his arm.

"You wait a minute," he said. "You can't climb that slope in less than half an hour, and

Ned will be here before that. Look! He's coming now, like the wind!"

The aeroplane, high up in the hazy sky, was indeed making good progress toward the little cup in the mountain side. While the boys looked they saw it shift away to the west, whirl back to the east, dart off to the north and back again.

"He's huntin' for us," Jimmie said.

"He's investigating!" Frank cut in.

"Investigating what?" Pat demanded. "He's smelling of this steak à la brigand and is hunting for it. Let be. He'll find us."

The sky was growing more uncertain every minute, and puffs of smoke were seen out in the west, over the rim of the cup.

"The world is on fire, I tell you!" Jimmie cried, presently. "That's what Ned is shiftin' about for. If the blaze wasn't high up on the mountains we couldn't see the columns of smoke over the rim of the valley."

"Well," Pat observed, "the fire can't get in here. Nothing to burn."

"It can fill the cup with hot air and scorch us to death," Frank said, uneasily. "I think we'd better be looking about for a place to crawl into."

"Wait until Ned comes," Jimmie suggested. "He'll know what to do."

The aeroplane acted badly in the currents caused by the burning forest, but Ned finally managed to bring it down in the valley. The boys gathered about him, all excitement, and the steak à la brigand was for the moment forgotten in the joy at the return of the patrol leader and the anxiety to learn something of conditions out in the woods.

"It's going to be a great conflagration," Ned said, "but I think the aeroplane will be safe here. The whole slope is on fire."

"I wouldn't take chances on leaving it here," Frank advised. "I'd jump over the divide with it."

"I have been in the air three hours now," Ned replied, "and must have a rest. "Besides, we must remain where we can, if necessary, help head off the flames. That is what we are here for, remember."

"Not to fight fires," corrected Frank, "but to find out who sets them."

"Anyhow," Ned replied, "we must fight the fire, if it gives us a chance, now that we are here. Now, what do you think that is?" he added,

as a chorus of howls and cries came up from the slope on the west.

"Sounds like a country circus!" Jimmie laughed.

"That is just what it is!" Ned exclaimed. "Here! Help me roll the aeroplane into that nook, where it won't be trampled into splinters. Now you boys get behind it, and I'll get in front. Whatever you see or hear, don't shoot unless you are actually attacked."

The boys obeyed the commands without a word of comment, well knowing what was coming next. A breeze was sliding up the slope, bringing with it flying masses of smoke. Presently birds began to stagger through the heavy atmosphere, flying low, almost within reaching distance, as they had fled long before the mounting flames and were exhausted.

"I wish this would let up a moment," Pat said, "long enough for us to reach that steak à la brigand. It must be about done by this time."

"I'll go an' get it," volunteered Jimmie. "An' eat most of it on the way back."

"Then bring the coffee," cried Jack.

"Why can't we all go out there and eat?" asked Frank.

The boys were about starting with a rush when Ned caught two of them by the arm and stopped the others by a quick call. Through the smoke and the hot air on the rim of the cup, a great head, a head neither white nor black, but grizzly, was seen. Then a deer bounded over and crouched down in the valley. Next two mountain lions raced over the lip of the valley and halted growling, within a few yards of the boys.

"There goes our steak à la brigand!" Jimmie cried, as the rush of frightened animals showed under the smoke. "I'll eat one of them deer to pay for this," he added.

"You'll be lucky if one of these wild animals doesn't eat you," Jack said. "How would you like to be back in little old Washington Square just now?"

"Forget it!" was the boy's only reply.

"Will the fire get here?" Frank asked of Ned, as the wild creatures of the forest poured into the valley, regardless of the presence of the boys, unmindful of the proximity of each other.

"I don't think the flames will come into the cup," Ned replied, "but if the smoke settles here we shall have a hot time of it."

"Huh!" Jimmie cried. "The whole valley is full of mountain lions, an' bears, an' deer, an' snakes, an' rabbits. There ain't no room for any smoke!"

Then the smoke rolled away for an instant, showing a sun as red as a piece of molten iron; showing, too, a huddle of forest animals crowding together in the center of the valley. In their terror of the fire they had forgotten to be afraid of mankind—of each other!

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHAOS OF A BURNING WORLD.

That was a day long to be remembered in the Great Northwest. It is true that the destruction of life and property at that time by no means equaled the ruin wrought by the forest fires of August, 1910, but the conflagration was serious in its final results for all that.

In August of the previous year half a hundred persons lost their lives in the fierce fires which swept over portions of Idaho and Montana, and more than six billion feet of lumber were destroyed. At that time wild animals raced into the log houses of settlers in order to escape the flames. In one instance, placed on record by a forester, a mountain lion actually sought shelter under a bed.

In that case, too, the fire virtually held its ruthless way until it burned itself out, as there were no trails, no telephones, no provisions for the fire fighters. The men of the forest patrol were each guarding a hundred thousand acres. In the more civilized countries of Europe, a thousand acres is considered a large district for one man.

It was hot and close in the odd little valley on the mountain side. There seemed a premonition of greater danger in the very air—the lifeless air which seemed to dry the lungs beyond power of action. The wind, coming over the blazing forests, struck hot upon the face and scorched the lips, while the acrid smoke filled the eyes, the ears, the nostrils.

It seemed to Ned that everything east of the Kootenai river must be on fire. Now and then, drawn by some wayward current of air, the thick smoke lifted in the little cup-like valley, and the cowering wild animals could be seen, huddling together in the terror of the time, deer no longer afraid of lion or bear, lion and bear forgetting to mark their prey.

Finally, anxious to know the extent of the disaster, so far as it might be judged by a personal view of the country west of the valley, Ned left the boys in charge of the aeroplane and crept toward the rim of the cup. Jimmie saw him leaving and started on after him, but Jack drew him back.

"Let him go alone, for once," Jack said, "he's only going to find out where this menagerie of wild animals comes from."

Jimmie settled sullenly back by Jack's side, resolved to break away at the first opportunity and follow the patrol leader.

When Ned gained the elevation he sought, the procession of wild animals had come to an end, although birds, frightened and singed by the flames, were calling from the sky. Everywhere rolled billows of smoke, blown on ahead of the line of fire and in a measure concealing its fatal advance.

Now and then, however, a spurt of hot wind came over the burned waste and lifted the curtain for an instant. Then the boy saw that the fire was crawling up the slope, not racing as it had earlier in the day, but moving steadily, sweeping the earth of the undergrowth, but leaving many large trees.

The danger was decreasing there, but lower down the flames were consuming everything in their path, eating down great trees and leaving fiery, straggling columns to consume them to ashes. Ned thanked his stars that the growths on the slope were not dense enough to foster such a blaze as that which burned below.

It has been stated by those who know that ordinary care would have prevented most of the devastating forest fires which have raged in the

Northwest. Experts claim that forests should be burned over under careful supervision, every three or four years. This, they say, will prevent the accumulation of inflammable material such as caused the terrible losses of August, 1910.

Ned saw at once the expediency of the proposed remedy. He knew that resinous spines, steeped in the drippings of pitch and turp from the overhead branches, had lain many inches deep around the trunks of the trees, beneath fallen boles, and at the roots of the undergrowth. This accumulation made the extinguishing of forest fires impossible. He understood that the government had virtually provided for what followed by permitting this material to accumulate year after year.

It is declared by foresters and others who strove to check that wall of fire that it advanced at the rate of a mile a minute between the Kootenai river and the foothills. Below where Ned lay was a burning furnace. It was so hot that he dare not lift his face a second time, and so he moved back to the aeroplane, which he found still safe from the flames, and the wild creatures crouching in the center of the valley.

"What are the prospects?" Frank asked, speaking with his lips close to the ear of the

patrol leader, for the roaring of the flames rendered ordinary conversation difficult.

"There is safety here," Ned replied, "but everything to the west seems to be burning."

"Gee!" Jimmie cried, looking Ned in the face, "how would you like to meet a friend with a basket of ice?"

"Ice wouldn't last long here," Frank said.

"Not if I got hold of it!" Jimmie grunted.

As the line of fire came nearer to the top of the slope the air grew hotter, the smoke denser and more stifling. Pat remembered that a pail of water from a spring had been brought to the vicinity of the aeroplane soon after Ned landed, and the boys wet their handkerchiefs and bound them over their eyes and mouths.

As the heat increased the wild creatures crowding together ominously. When a feeble beast was trampled by a stronger one, or when a rattler struck at the leg of a bear or deer, there was a cry of pain and a quick milling of the pack.

"If this doesn't end soon," Frank shouted to Ned through his handkerchief, "there will be a stampede here. Then it will be all off for us."

Ned looked around the little circle before replying. The boys certainly looked like "white caps" with their sheeted faces.

"We'll have to wait and hope for the best," he said. "If the animals come this way, we must stop them, so far as we are able, with our guns and electric flashlights."

Presently night fell, and the wind quieted a little at the setting of the sun. In a short time the clouds rolled away in sullen, threatening groups, and the stars looked down on the forest tragedy. Later, there would be moonlight.

"I wonder if all the world is burned, except just this mountain?" Jimmie asked, taking the handkerchief from his face and wiping the smoke out of his inflamed eyes. "It looks that way."

"There seems to be enough left to hold a lot of heat," Jack said. "I don't believe it will ever be cool again."

"If we'd only saved that brigand steak!" wailed Jimmie.

With the half light and the cooler air there came a commotion in the mass of forest creatures in the center of the valley. It was night now, and they seemed to feel the mounting of their wild instincts to be up and away on the hunt.

Under the stars, one by one, they slunk away, bears and mountain lions turning sullenly toward the lesser beasts, but still too terrified by what they had passed through to feel the pangs

of hunger. In half an hour the menagerie had vanished, some to the mountain, some over the slopes to the north and south. The boys drew long breaths of relief when the shambling figure of the last bear disappeared.

Once Jack drew his gun on a fat old buck who seemed desirous of investigating the aeroplane, but Ned saw the action and checked the slaughter.

"Let him alone," he said. "He's lived through this hell on earth, so give him one more chance."

The boys now began gathering up their scattered utensils, restaking the tents, and preparing supper. Jimmie proposed another brigand steak, but Pat insisted that he never wanted to get near enough to a fire to cook again, so they made an indifferent meal of biscuit and tinned pork and beans, not even going to the trouble to boil coffee.

While they were eating a gunshot came from the east, followed by the challenge of a chanticleer.

"What do you know about that?" demanded Jimmie.

"I suppose," Jack complained, "that we've been eating a picked-up supper within a few rods of a farmhouse, or cattle ranch!"

"You might pry open some of the rocks back there," Pat observed, with sarcasm, "and see if you can find the house you speak of. It was a human throat that crow came from."

"Sure it was!" cried Jimmie. "It was a Boy Scout call. Now just see me get him to talking."

"What's a Rooster patrol chap doing here!" asked Jack. "I guess we are all having bad dreams."

Jimmie did not reply. Instead he put his hands to his throat and in a second a long snarling wolf cry came forth, rising into a shrill call, as if summoning a pack at a distance.

"We'll see what he knows about that," the boy said.

As they listened the challenge of the chanticleer came once more. This time Jack answered it with the growl of a black bear, which seemed to Frank to be a great improvement on his practice stunts in the Black Bear Patrol club rooms in New York.

This odd exchange of greetings kept up for some moments, and then the figure of a boy of perhaps seventeen was seen in the uncertain light, making slow progress down the mountain, a short distance to the north. He carried a hav-

ersack on his shoulders and was dressed in the khaki uniform of the Boy Scouts of America.

"He must be used to mountain work," Jack remarked, as the boy leaped lightly from ledge to ledge and finally dropped into the valley. "I couldn't do that, even in broad daylight, to save my life!"

The stranger now advanced to the group of boys and gave them the half salute of the Boy Scouts, standing with right arm straight out from the shoulder, palm outward, three fingers standing vertical, the thumb crossing the palm to rest on the bent-in little finger. Ned replied with the full salute, which is made with the hand in the same attitude, only at the forehead.

"What does the badge say?" demanded Jimmie.

"Be prepared!" was the quick reply.

"For what?" was the next question.

"To assist those in distress."

"You're all right," Jimmie shouted. "What patrol?"

"Chanticleer, Denver," was the reply.

"That accounts for the way you lighted down from the mountain," laughed Ned.

"I've got used to climbing in walking the streets of my home town," smiled the other. "Is

Ned Nestor here?" he added. "My name is Ernest Whipple; I'm looking for Mr. Ned Nestor."

"Here he is, the only good-looker in the bunch," Jack laughed, pushing Ned forward. "What do you want of him?"

"My father is connected with the Secret Service at Washington," was the reply, "and he posted me as to what was going on here. Said I might come out and join the party, if Mr. Nestor would permit it. What do you say?"

Of course the son of a man connected with the Secret Service at Washington—a man who undoubtedly knew all the plans of the men who had sent Ned into the Northwest—was not to be ignored, but at the same time Ernest would have been received into the party on the strength of his own engaging personality, his own frank manner. From the very first moment he was a favorite with all the boys.

"You're as welcome as the flowers of May!" Frank cried. "Been to supper?"

"Last night!" grinned Ernest. "My haversack is empty—also my stomach. I had to take to the mountain in order to keep out of the fire, and couldn't connect with a grub stake."

"Then there are fires east of the divide?" asked Ned.

"Sure," was the reply, "although they are nothing like the ones over here. The foresters are watching them, and there is little danger of their getting a big start."

"Where did you find foresters?" asked Ned, wondering if the men who had sneaked away from the cavern were not posing as foresters, waiting to do further mischief.

"They are in camp beyond the summit," was the reply. "They told me they had patrols all through the lower levels."

Jack gave a description of the man who had visited the camp on the plateau, and was not at all surprised when Ernest identified the fellow as the apparent leader of the band of foresters he had passed on his way west.

"I see that you don't believe the men are foresters," Ernest said, looking into Ned's anxious face. "Well, to tell the truth, I doubt it myself. I heard some talk there that set me thinking, after I got away. There was a man there who had just arrived from San Francisco, they said, and he was doing a good deal of kicking about something that had been done, or hadn't been done. I don't know which."

"Can you describe the fellow?" asked Ned, a quick suspicion coming to his mind.

"Of course I can," was the reply, and the remainder of the answer gave an accurate word photograph of one Albert Lemon.

Ned was thinking fast. How had Lemon reached the eastern side of the divide so quickly. He, himself, had traveled swiftly from San Francisco, leaving soon after his exit from the bachelor apartment where the strange and not entirely satisfactory interview had taken place. He had left the man who claimed to be Albert Lemon half dazed and weakened from the effects of opium—still weary from a long and exhausting journey, as shown by his clothing, and yet the fellow had beaten him out in the race to the mountains.

Why? Certainly not to take charge of the body of his unfortunate friend, for the grave was not there, but in a little hollow away to the north and near the lake. His business seemed to lie with the outlaws who had, apparently, committed the crime. Why? Had the man been killed as the result of a conspiracy between the two interests?

This point was worth looking into, for the motive for the deed might also prove to be the motive for other crimes—among them the burning of forests.

CHAPTER X.

CHASING THE MILKY WAY.

While the boys were exchanging experiences with Ernest Whipple, talking over Boy Scout matters and arranging for a sleeping place for the stranger, Ned was busy with his aeroplane. It had not suffered in the least from the heat and wind, and there was plenty of gasoline on hand for a journey which he was thinking of taking.

"Where are we goin' to-night?" Jimmie asked, finally, strolling over to the spot where the great bird lay.

"As the wind is right," Ned laughed, "I thought I'd take a sail over the divide and see what the alleged foresters are up to."

"All right," the boy said, "just wait until I get a big blanket to wrap up in and I'll go with you."

Ned smiled at the determination of the lad to keep close to his side. He knew that Jimmie dreaded the very idea of leaving the solid earth that night, still he found him willing to

make the ascent merely for the sake of being in his company.

"All right, kid," he said. "You may go if you want to, but it may be morning before we get back to camp."

"You can't remain in the air all that time," Jimmie said.

"I am fully aware of that," Ned replied, "but I can drop down over on the other side and rest and tinker with the machine—if she doesn't work just right."

"You haven't got gasoline enough," urged Jimmie, who would have argued Ned out of the notion of the night flight if possible, but who was determined to go with him if he went.

"The first thing I do," Ned replied, "will be to fly over the Great Northern right of way and fill up with gasoline. Besides filling the tanks, I shall carry a lot away in an aluminum keg I have provided for that purpose."

"Well," Jimmie said, with a tired sigh, "I should think you'd been through enough to-day and to-night, without goin' off in the dark, but I'm goin' if you do."

After talking with the others regarding his intentions, and warning them to keep a sharp lookout during his absence, Ned assisted Jimmie

to his seat and the two were away. There was scant room for a rise between the spot where the machine lay and the foot of the range, but Ned had little difficulty in getting into the sky and swinging along in the breeze.

It was now after ten o'clock, and the moon was high in the heavens. To the east the dark passes of the mountains showed green and misty in the moonlight. To the west the burned spaces looked dark and forbidding, with smoke half hiding the ruin that had been wrought. Jimmie clung to the machine and insisted that Ned was chasing the Milky Way when he lifted the aeroplane up the level of the divide.

Before crossing the divide, however, Ned flew to the Great Northern right of way and filled his tanks with gasoline, also filling the extra keg. The machine, which was an improved Wright, was then turned to the northeast. So perfect have aeroplanes now become that even inexperienced drivers may sometimes venture into the air with them with impunity, still it is well known that it is more the man than the machine that decides whether there shall be a tumble or a successful flight.

The aeroplane is a wonderful invention, yet the point which really makes it so serviceable

is a very simple one. For years inventors studied ways of making a heavier-than-air machine sail through the sky like a bird. Then the gasoline engine came, and all the rest seemed easy.

But no one could keep control of the aeroplane. It moved about according to its own whims, and tipped drivers out at its own sweet will. Then the Wrights thought of lifting and lowering the planes to represent the wings and feathers of a bird. The secret had been found and required only experience and practice. Here was a machine light enough to fly, yet strong enough to carry with safety its powerful engine and two or more passengers, if there is room provided for them.

It is so stout that a man may walk over it while it lies on the ground, and yet so delicate in control when in the air that a slight pull on a lever will dip one wing, lift the other, and at the same time turn a vertical tail-rudder about to give the necessary balancing pull with almost the instinctive adaptability of a bird's wings and feathers.

And this wonderful machine, while speeding through the air with the velocity of an express train, can be halted almost instantly and whirled about on its tail. It will be seen that it is the

man at the levers who makes or breaks a journey in the air. One man may do almost anything with a machine, while another may send himself to eternity with the same one. It was Ned's good fortune that he was naturally ingenious and quick to make his hands follow the impulses of his brain.

When a person is thundering through the air, a thousand feet above the earth, he must remain perfectly calm, even with the engine thundering behind his ears, tears running in streams down his face, and the wind fluttering his clothes into rags and ravelings, as he wishes he was back on land.

Besides, there are no level plains in the air, as there are on earth. Every bird-man knows that he is liable to come up against a fierce current or tumble into a hole in the atmosphere at any moment. While traveling in water one can see what is ahead and on both sides, but this is not so in the air. The currents, swirls, eddies, holes, do not show at all.

When Ned left the caché where the gasoline and provisions had been hidden away, he put on half speed, swinging steadily skyward on a broad spiral. His purpose was to pass over the summit and have a look at the forests on the east side.

The passenger's seat in the Wright machine is in the middle. The engine is at his right and the driver at his left, so that the balance is the same whether an extra person is carried or not. Jimmie was glad of this, for it placed him close to Ned. In that half light, with the earth far below, with the pounding of the engine and the whistling of the wind, the boy felt the need of close human companionship.

He sat in a wooden seat with his back against the rest, holding to one of the uprights with both hands, and resting his tingling feet on a cross-bar. A guy-wire passed across in front, close to his chest, so he was now fastened in.

He wanted to talk with Ned, to hear the sound of his voice, but the clamor of the engine prevented that, so he just sat still and looked down on the flying forest below. It seemed to him, at least, that the forest was moving, while he was standing still in the starlight.

Up the aeroplane went, and still higher up. Jimmie saw the great divide below, and saw little red specks in the forests of the eastern slope which denoted forest fires not yet grown to maturity. After passing the summit Ned saw the campfire of the men Ernest had spoken of He passed them, swung around a circle lower

down, selected a spot where he thought he could land with safety, and dropped down.

Jimmie declared afterwards that he felt as if he had been thrown out of the window of a twenty-story building—and the highest window at that. When the aeroplane came into the shadows of the high trees where the landing was being made he knew that a wind was blowing at the surface and feared that the machine would be carried along on the ground and dumped over into a cañon.

The machine sank gracefully into a glade rather high up on the slope, and the boys alighted to stretch their legs. Ned's first move was to see if there was plenty of room for him to get out. What he found was an incline to the east, an incline ending at a great cañon, into which he would have been hurled had the aeroplane run fifty feet farther on the ground.

"I think I can make it," he said, "but it is risky. It wouldn't be nice to take a header a thousand feet down."

After the inspection of the locality Ned extinguished all the lights and sat down to map out his plans for the remainder of the night. There were the usual noises of the forest, as found at night, but no human sounds intruded.

Ned knew that the clamor of the engine must have been heard by the men in the camp he had flown over, and he had no doubt that the outlaws would make a quick excursion to his landing place, if they could determine where it was. So he put out the lights and listened for some indication of the approach of the others.

"They won't find us in a thousand years," Jimmie volunteered, as the two sat close together under a great tree.

"I hope not," Ned replied, "for then we shall have a better chance to find them."

"What do you want to find 'em for?" questioned the boy. "You can't pinch 'em, 'cause you haven't got the proof, an' you couldn't if you had the proof, 'cause there ain't enough of us. They'd eat us up like spinach."

"You are right as far as you have gone," Ned replied, "but you have not gone far enough. What I want now is to find out what they are doing here. And, also, I want to find out about that fellow from San Francisco. If the description is any good, he was in the city when I left it, and I don't see how he ever got here so soon. I came part way on an aeroplane, but it seems that he traveled farther and beat me out."

"What's he got to do with it?" asked Jimmie. "What did you find out in the city? You won't have no luck if you don't tell me all about it."

So, while they waited, Ned told him "all about it," while the boy sat in the dusk with his eyes and mouth both opened wide at the mystery of the thing.

"I don't believe Albert Lemon ever got out here so soon," the lad said, when the story was told. "He couldn't."

"Then who is the man from San Francisco?" asked Ned.

"It can't be the dead man?" questioned Jimmie.

"You saw him buried," Ned answered.

"Then I give it up!" Jimmie said.

The two sat there in silence a long time, then Jimmie gave Ned's arm a pull and pointed to a flickering light in the forest just above the glade where the aeroplane rested.

"They think you've landed somewhere here," the boy said, "an' have set fire to the woods."

"I think you have guessed it," Ned said. "However, the blaze won't run very fast up there, for the undergrowth is scanty, so we've got plenty of time to get out of the way."

Jimmie scrambled up the slope, clinging to rocks and roots with both fingers and feet, and ran toward the blaze. Ned watched the little fellow dashing along with no little anxiety, for the outlaws might be there in the thickets, watching for some attempt to be made to lift the aeroplane.

He saw Jimmie recklessly climb to the top of a great rock which jutted out from the side of the mountain and saw his figure outlined against the growing blaze on the slope above. Then the fire died down, as if for want of material, and the top of the rock could no longer be seen.

Ned listened, but Jimmie did not return. The effort to create a general conflagration on the mountain side had evidently failed, for there was little to burn save the green boles of trees, that section having been swept by fire a year before.

Not daring to leave the aeroplane for even an instant, Ned awaited the return of the boy with premonitions of trouble in his mind. Presently he heard a shot, then a cry, and after that a brutal laugh. The outlaws were nearer than he thought.

There was only one thing for Ned to do, and that was to get the aeroplane into the sky

immediately, and so once more place it beyond the reach of the outlaws. There was nothing he could do to aid Jimmie, he reflected, sadly, by remaining there.

It was no task at all to start the rollers down the incline, but the cañon threatened if he did not get it off the ground in quick time. He knocked the stones out from under the wheels and sprang into his seat. The machine, gaining momentum, moved on sedately. It had acquired a fair rate of speed when he came within a few feet of the cañon.

Then, after letting it get all the headway possible in that confined space without coming too close to the cañon, Ned pulled the lever which tilted the front rudder planes. Trifling as the deflection was the man-made bird felt its influence and rose from the slope as if endowed with life.

It reached the edge of the descent some distance in the air, and the boy was congratulating himself on the success of his unaided rise when the big machine began to sag as if dropping to the ground, five hundred feet below.

The west wall of the cañon ran straight down, and it seemed to Ned that he was following it, like an iron spike thrown off the ledge. He

knew very well what had occurred. He had fallen into one of the down-tipping currents so frequent in mountain districts.

The air, he knew, was sliding down the precipice just as water tumbles over a dam. If it turned, as it might, when it struck the lower strata of air, he might secure control of his machine and manage to lift it out of the cañon. If it did not, he would doubtless fall to the rocky floor of the cañon, and lie there until some chance hunter or forester came upon a heap of bleaching bones and the wreck of an aeroplane.

But even at that swift pace downward, and at that exciting moment, Ned found himself puzzling over the strange sight he saw in a break in the wall of the cañon. It was a large opening he looked into, and strange figures were gathered about a cooking fire.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LUCK OF A BOWERY BOY.

Jimmie opened his eyes and looked about. It was a gloomy niche in a perpendicular wall that he looked out of. Rock to right and left and rear. In front a velvet summer sky, with stars winking over a vast stretch of broken country. There was a ledge a foot in width outside the entrance to the niche, but the boy could not see how long it was, or where it led to.

His head ached and there was a drawing sensation to the skin of his forehead and right cheek, as if some sticky substance had congealed there. When he reached a hand up to see what the trouble was he found that his head was tied up in a cloth. There was no one in sight to ask questions of, so he arose to a sitting position and leaned forward.

The action brought on a whirl of dizziness, and he dropped back against the wall for support. He knew then that he had received a hard blow on the head, and that he had lost consid-

erable blood. Once before in his life he had felt that dizzy weakness, and that was after an artery had been cut in his leg and he had nearly bled to death before reaching a hospital.

When he lay back trying to get something like a balance in his brain, he saw that it was near midnight. He knew that by the stars, for he had watched them many a hot night, lying on his back on a dray backed up some alley down near the East river, in New York.

There were certain stars which always occupied just such a position at midnight in New York. He did not know their names, but he knew that at midnight in Montana they would not be so far advanced across the sky. Therefore he looked for the stars as they appeared at nine o'clock on the Atlantic. When he found them he knew from their location that it had been something over an hour since he had left Ned and the aeroplane.

The three hours difference in time between New York and Montana—three hours in round numbers—would make the midnight stars three hours late, of course. Anyway, the boy was pretty certain of the time.

Then his mind went back to Ned and the aeroplane, and the cañon in front of the landing

place. He recalled the stop, and remembered leaving Ned to see what was doing in the way of forest fires. He remembered, too, getting up on a high rock to look over at the creeping flames.

But strange to say he did not remember getting down again. The next thing on the record of his mind was that niche in the wall and the stars shining down out of a summer sky, the same stars he had looked at in old New York. Of course he had been struck the blow he had received while mounting the rock, otherwise he would know something of the attack.

His mind did not have to travel along the records of the past very far to convince him that he had made a mistake in leaving Ned. Of course he had been "geezled" by the outlaws, as he expressed it, and of course the boys would delay the business they were on in order to look him up—which, he reluctantly admitted to himself, would be a waste of time, as any boy capable of doing such foolish stunts certainly was not worth the trouble of looking up.

Presently the pain in his head became less violent and the dizziness in a measure passed away. Then he pushed out to the edge of the ledge and sat with his feet hanging over. It was a straight drop down. Below he could see

a stream of water running along the bottom of the cañon.

Out, perhaps two hundred yards from his resting place, he saw a slope half covered with trees. He looked down into the gulf in the hope of seeing the aeroplane, but it was not in sight. Ned must have taken it away. Or he might have been overpowered and the machine broken up.

Of course the outlaws would break up the machine if they secured possession of it. They would not dare use it in that region, and it was about as handy a thing to ship away secretly as a white elephant.

There were no lights in sight anywhere, save a slight glow of coals away down at the bottom of the cañon. That might be the remains of the aeroplane, or it might be a bit of forest fire which had not burned itself out. Very much disgusted with himself, the boy leaned farther out wondering if there wasn't a ledge which wound its way to the bottom of the cañon, or to the summit above.

So intently was he studying on this proposition that he did not hear footsteps approaching, nor did he realize that there was any human being near him until he felt a hand laid lightly on his shoulder.

"Be careful, young man," the voice said, "or you'll get another tumble. How do you feel by this time?"

"Fine!" cried the boy, turning a pair of astonished eyes toward the south, where a bulky personage stood blocking the ledge to the extent of obscuration.

"Well, don't take any more chances, then," said the bulky person, and Jimmie was forced, not ungently, back into the niche.

The man entered after the boy and threw himself down on the stone floor of the cut in the wall of the cañon. He was short and stout, with a double chin and a pointed forehead which gave his face the appearance of being engraved on a lemon. He was quite bald, and his hair, that which remained, was turning gray. His eyes were steel blue, and his mouth one long, thin-lipped slit between fat cheeks.

Jimmie did not like his looks at all, and he resented the patronizing voice and manner. So he leaned sullenly against the wall and waited for the other to open the conversation. He had not long to wait, for the man was busy in a moment.

"How did you get that fall?" he asked.

So, Jimmie thought, they were going to claim that he had a fall, and that they had found him,

and cared for him gently, and were now ready to do anything in the world for his comfort. The boy decided that the correct course for him to pursue was to follow the lead of the other.

"Guess I slipped off a rock," he said, knowing very well that he had been knocked off his feet so suddenly that he had instantly lost consciousness.

"What were you doing there?" was the next question.

"Why, I had been out in the aeroplane, and I got out to see if the forest fire I saw was going to be anything serious, and then I tumbled."

"Where is the boy who was with you in the aeroplane?" asked the other.

Jimmie replied that he had no idea, which was, of course, the answer expected of him. His questioner remained silent a moment, looking out over the rugged land to the east. When he spoke again it was to ask:

"What are you doing in the Rocky Mountains?"

Jimmie thought that was a cheeky question, and a useless one, for he had no doubt that the fellow knew nearly as much about his business as he did about his own.

"We're on a vacation," he replied. "Five of us have a camp over on the other side of the divide. We're just playing prospectors."

"Very nice vacation for you all," the other said, "but you ought to be more careful with your fires. You started a large conflagration yesterday."

So the Boy Scouts were to be accused of that! Jimmie wished at that moment that the other boys were there. He wanted to tell this fat hypocrite what he thought of him and stand a fair show in the fracas which might follow.

"I don't think we set any fires," he said. "The fires started a long way from our camp."

"I know what I'm talking about," the other said.

Jimmie did not reply. He was wondering what would be the next move of the fat party, and whether Ned or the boys left in camp would be out to look him up before the morning.

"I am in charge of this district," the other went on. "I'm Captain Slocum of the forestry force."

Jimmie did not believe it, but did not say so. He only stared at the other in a manner which nettled his dignity.

"I have been watching you boys ever since you have been here," Captain Slocum went on. "I didn't know what you were up to, and so I watched."

"Yes, sir," said Jimmie, quite humbly, though angry enough to fight the man single-handed.

"It seems that you have left forest fires wherever you have camped," Slocum went on, with an all-knowing air. "To-night I sent a party of foresters over to the camp to arrest you all."

"Yes, sir," replied Jimmie again, shutting his lips hard in order to prevent saying a great deal more.

"Do you think they will find this Ned Nestor there?" Slocum asked, then.

"I don't know whether he could get his machine back to the camp," Jimmie replied.

"Well, wouldn't he go without it?"

"No, sir; I don't think he would, unless it was certain that he could not take it with him."

"We'll find him, anyway," Slocum continued.

"Where are you goin' to take us for trial?" Jimmie asked.

"We'll have to consider that part of the matter later on," was the reply. "The first thing for us to do is to lock you up good and tight and stop the setting of forest fires."

"Yes, sir," replied Jimmie, still humbly, but still thinking what he would do to this fat falsifier if he ever got a chance.

"I'm glad you confess," Slocum said.

"I didn't," said Jimmie.

"Why, yes, you did," insisted the other. "You admitted setting the fires."

Jimmie made no reply. Far down in the cañon he saw a glint of flame. It was not a forest fire. It was not even the red light of a campfire or a lantern. The light was white, and the boy knew it for what it was—an electric searchlight, such as Ned always carried on his aeroplane trips.

Slocum did not seem to see the light. His eyes were fixed on the face of the boy he was talking with, although the features did not show very distinctly in the dim light of the night.

"Well, to tell you the truth, we've already captured this Ned Nestor," Slocum added, maliciously, Jimmie thought, "and no doubt my men have also captured those at the camp. Nestor broke a leg in trying to get away, but

when he was fairly cornered he confessed everything."

"Yes, sir," answered Jimmie.

There was nothing else the boy could say without putting himself in the way of a beating. If he had expressed his opinion of this story no doubt he would have been given physical punishment for his frankness.

"And so," Slocum smiled, "you may as well continue the confession you began."

Jimmie recognized this as clumsy work in the third degree, but he did not say so. He was watching the light below. Now it disappeared behind a great rock or tree. Now it came out in the opening again and moved about in a circle.

"Ned is examining his 'plane, preparatory to going back to camp," the boy thought. "Wonder if he's been all this time lookin' for me?"

The boy paid little attention to what Slocum said after this. Most of the time he was looking into the sky, or anywhere rather than where his thoughts were fixed. He had no intention of directing the gaze of the alleged forester to what was going on in the cañon.

Directly he saw the flashlight flutter over the white planes then become stationary. Ned,

he knew, was getting ready to make a flight. He could imagine what the boy's feelings were, for he knew Ned's affection for him. Indeed, it was with a heavy heart that the patrol leader left the place without Jimmie.

"And there is also a suspicion that you boys are interested in getting opium over the border without settling with Uncle Sam," Jimmie heard Slocum saying, as he watched the aeroplane move forward, lift for a moment, and then drop down out of sight. He knew of the precipice just ahead of the machine, and trembled for fear that Ned had not been able to lift the aeroplane, but had tumbled into the cañon with it.

"Anyway," Slocum continued, "we shall place you under arrest for setting fire to the woods and also for smuggling."

Just at that moment Jimmie was not at all interested in what Slocum was saying to him. He took no interest whatever in any threat made by the fellow. He was watching the cañon for some sign of the reappearance of the aeroplane.

After what seemed an eternity to the lad he saw the light again, this time higher up than be-

fore. It was lifting slowly, turning round and round in a spiral, and Jimmie knew that there was no room to mount into the sky in a straight line. Ned's control of the machine was wonderful, and it lifted gradually until it was above the line of the hills on the other side and shot away to the west.

Then Slocum saw it. Jimmie blamed himself for calling his attention to it by lifting his head to follow the flight across the sky.

"There is another aeroplane," Slocum said.

Jimmie could not restrain a laugh, which intruded oddly enough on the tense silence of the moment.

"You don't think it is Nestor, do you?" Slocum asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Jimmie, still humbly.

"But he must have taken a drop down the cañon," urged Slocum.

"Yes, sir," replied Jimmie, "but you said you had captured him!"

Slocum eyed the boy with rage in his eyes. He knew very well that while he had been telling of Ned's capture and confession, Jimmie had been watching his chum get his aeroplane out of the cañon.

"You haven't even thanked me for getting you out of the mess I found you in, and doctoring up your wound," he said, presently, resolved to keep on good terms with the boy for a short time longer, if it was possible to do so.

"Thank you, sir!" Jimmie said, very modestly. "I think I must have received a good bump on the head."

"Indeed you did," smiled the other.

After a little further talk Slocum led the boy away to a cavern in the wall of the cañon which seemed to the weary lad to have no end. He saw several people lounging about as he passed through a large chamber, but paid little attention to them.

At last Slocum halted in a little alcove opening from a second chamber, in which were assembled at least a score of Chinamen.

"These people won't harm you," he said to the boy, swinging his arm about to include the group. "Uncle Sam is trying them out in the forest service. I don't think much of the idea myself, but I'm not the boss."

Then Slocum went away and Jimmie lay down and watched the Chinamen. Listening, he heard one of them speaking in English, then in Chinese. He knew that he had heard that

peculiar voice and dialect before and devoted his whole attention to the fellow.

"Well," he muttered, in a moment, with a grin, "I'm havin' the luck of a Bowery boy in this deal, an' that is the greatest luck in the world."

Then he fell to wondering what Chang Chee, the keeper of one of the worst Chinese restaurants on Doyers street was doing there, in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, mixed up with alleged foresters.

"Just wait until I see Ned!" the boy mused. "I'll put him next to somethin'. He'll be glad he brought me with him!"

Then the boy's thoughts went back to the camp in the Valley of the Wild Beasts, as he called it. Slocum might have told the truth about the attack on the boys, and they might be in trouble at that moment. He wondered, too, if, in case they were taken prisoners, they would be brought to the cavern.

"Anyhow," the lad mused, "they never intend to let me get out of this. If they did, they wouldn't have permitted me a sight of the Chinks. Unless I sneak away, there'll be an accident some day, an' then there'll be no more Jimmie McGraw!"

The boy was tired and weak, so that even such serious thoughts as these could not keep him awake. Wondering what conditions Ned had found at the camp, after soaring out of the cañon, he dropped his head against the stone wall of the alcove and was soon in a deep sleep. The fumes of opium with which the cavern was filled might in a measure have contributed to this, but, anyway, nature was exhausted, and the boy's slumber was heavy and dreamless.

CHAPTER XII.

A MEMBER OF THE OWL PATROL.

When Jimmie awoke the fire which had burned in the cavern had gone out, and those who remained in the chamber seemed to be fast asleep. He tumbled out of his alcove, still feeling weak and dizzy, and moved toward a hanging rug which closed the entrance to the place.

He drew one side of the rug back and saw the white light of day. The sun seemed to be high up in the sky, for the ledge at the front of the cavern showed a streak of gold. Two Chinamen sat at the entrance to the outer cave, and when he advanced toward them they waved him back. Instead of retreating he stood regarding them with a puzzled look on his face.

One was Chang Chee, the keeper of the disreputable Chinese dive on Doyers street, whom Jimmie had noticed the night before, and the other was a much younger man—a boy, in fact. When Chang ordered Jimmie back the youngster turned toward him a face showing both curiosity and interest.

"What's doin' here?" Jimmie demanded, in a moment.

He thought best not to show that he recognized Chang, for he knew that the identification of the Chinaman would only add to his peril, if that were possible. It was certain that Chang would never permit the information that he had been seen there to get out to the government officers.

Jimmie's idea at that time was that he had blundered on a gang of opium smugglers, although he could not understand why so many Chinamen were, apparently, engaged in the illegal traffic.

Chang finally turned his face away, with a frown, and Jimmie advanced a step toward the boy, who threw himself carelessly down on his back and extended his right arm straight up from the shoulder. Jimmie's eyes opened wider, and his breath almost stopped, when he saw the thumb and little finger thrown diagonally across the palm of the hand, the tip of the thumb covering the nail of the little finger, the three remaining fingers pointing upward.

In the excitement of the moment, in the amazement caused by his recognition of the Boy Scout challenge, Jimmie lost all caution.

"Say!" he began, but Chang turned a repulsive face and ordered him into the rear chamber.

The boy, thankful for the interruption, moved back a few paces, believing that the Chinese boy who had given him the sign would communicate with him as soon as opportunity offered.

This was the greatest puzzle the lad had ever been called upon to solve. Some of the questions he asked himself were:

"How did that Chinese boy become a Boy Scout?"

"Is there a Chinese patrol?"

"Was he permitted to become a member of an American patrol?"

"Why is he mixed up with that disreputable old Chink?"

"Will he help me out of this hole, or will he ignore me?"

Of course there was not one of the questions the boy could answer, so he went back to his alcove and sat down, half believing that he had imagined the challenge.

As the day wore on the men who had been asleep in the inner chamber arose, staggeringly, as if still under the stupefying influence of opi-

um, and made their trembling way outside. When they had all disappeared Chang pushed the rug aside so as to bring more light and air into the place and came and stood looking down on the boy.

Jimmie did not look up. He saw the shrunken figure up as far as the knees only. He was resolved not to open any conversation with the Chink. If he wanted to talk, Jimmie thought, let him choose his own subject and introduce it in his own way.

The yellow face of the Chinaman seemed to take on a more mask-like expression—or want of expression, rather—as the silence continued. When he spoke it was with a snarl which boded no good to the boy.

"Hungly?" he demanded.

"Hungry?" repeated Jimmie. "You know it! If you've got any rat sandwiches or puppy potpies, just introduce me!"

"Flesh!" growled Chang.

"Flesh?" repeated Jimmie. "Oh, yes, you mean fresh? Well, you'd be just as fresh as I am if you were as hungry."

"Cheek!" cried Chang. "Kid allels have cheek—an' tummy!"

"Sure," said Jimmie. "Go on an' get me a porterhouse steak with French potatoes. I could eat a car of raw onions."

Chang turned away and walked out to the ledge, where the Chinese boy stood, looking out into the sunshine. It was a glorious morning, with the air clear and just a little sharp, owing to the altitude. Here and there little swirls of smoke showed that fires were burning in the forest, though none seemed to be close to the range.

Reaching the boy's side Chang addressed a few words to him in Chinese and left the cave, turning back, after a few paces, to observe the boy, now standing with a long, keen-bladed clasp-knife in his hand. As Chang looked the boy ran his finger over the edge of the blade, as if to make sure that it was suitable for some purpose he had in view.

With an exclamation of rage Chang charged back at him and snatched the knife from his hand.

"You fool!" he cried.

"You let me alone!" shouted the other. "I tell you, I'm going to kill him!"

Jimmie heard the words and rose unsteadily to his feet. He recognized the voice as that of

the boy who had given him the Boy Scout challenge. At least it was not that of Chang, and there were only two figures outlined against the sky when he looked out beyond the rug, still pushed aside.

"Fool! Fool! Fool!"

Chang gritted out the words as he took the Chinese boy by the back of the neck and hustled him into the cave. Then he spoke for a minute in Chinese and turned away again. Jimmie stepped back into his alcove and felt around for a stone, or anything in the shape of a weapon, as the boy advanced toward him.

"What does the badge say?"

Jimmie opened his eyes wider than ever, if possible, and stood facing the boy, half hiding the stone he had found.

"Be prepared," he replied.

"Then drop that rock!"

Jimmie dropped it and stepped forward.

"Liu, Owl patrol, San Francisco," the Chinese boy said.

"McGraw, Wolf patrol, New York," replied Jimmie.

"You don't look very comfortable in here," Liu said.

"Nixy," replied Jimmie, wondering if the boy really was preparing to carry out the threat he had made to Chang.

"You heard what I just said to Chang?" Liu asked.

Jimmie nodded his bandaged head.

"Bluff!" said Liu. "He's watching now to see that I don't make an attempt on your life. Had to do it!"

"I see," Jimmie replied, wondering if it wasn't pretty near time to wake up.

"Why don't he want me killed?" Jimmie asked in a moment.

"He thinks you have information he needs," was the answer. "Are you hungry?"

"That's what Chang asked," Jimmie said, "but he didn't bring me any grub."

"He told me to," grinned Liu, "and I told him that I'd kill you if I got near enough to do so. He'll hang around until he sees me bring you something to eat."

"You ain't so very slow yourself," grinned Jimmie. "Where did you learn to speak United States so well?"

"Born in Frisco," was the reply. "The Boy Scouts take me out on their hunting trips to do the cooking. That's why I'm here now.

I know the mountains, and Chang hired me to go along with him."

"An' they took you into the patrol, did they?" asked Jimmie.

"Sure they did," was the reply. "Why not? I'm an American citizen, or will be in four years."

"Have they captured any of the others?" asked Jimmie.

The Chinese boy shook his head.

"Have they heard from the men they sent out to capture them?" was the next question.

Another shake of the head, then Liu drew closer and whispered.

"Do you see Chang poking his head around that rock in the opening? He's watching to see that I don't knife you!"

Jimmie saw the parchment-like face of the old reprobate peering around the rock and wanted to heave a stone at it, but knew that this would not be good policy. Instead he threw it at Liu, and missed, of course.

"You seem to be wide awake yourself," Liu said.

"Why don't you go and get me some grub?" demanded Jimmie." I'm near starved to death."

"All right!" said Liu, and turned away.

Jimmie was now in a deeper puzzle than before. He had no means of knowing whether Liu was telling him the truth. He might be trying to get into his confidence in order to gain the information sought, whatever it was.

However, in a short time Liu returned with a generous supply of food, fried fish, fresh biscuit—the boy wondered how Liu had managed to bake them there—coffee, and plenty of tinned goods.

"What's this bunch doin' here?" the boy asked, as he made heavy inroads on the fresh fish, coffee and biscuits.

"I don't know," was the hesitating reply.

"I know," Jimmie went on. "They're smuggling opium an' setting fire to the woods. They'll all get pinched!"

"I hope so," was the reply.

"It sounds odd to hear a Chinese boy talk straight United States," Jimmie said, after a short silence.

Liu made no reply for a moment. He was watching the ledge outside the entrance to the cave. The occasional rattle of pebbles told him that some one was standing there, probably just out of sight.

"What is Chang doin' here?" Jimmie asked, presently.

"He's in some scheme with the foresters," was the reply.

"They ain't no foresters!" Jimmie said. "They're timber thieves an' smugglers, an' firebugs, an' murderers!"

Liu shuddered but remained silent. After listening a second he went to the entrance and looked out. There was no one in sight at first, then a roughly dressed fellow came around the angle of the cliff to the north and approached him. The fellow was rather short for a man of his width of shoulder, and his step was remarkably light and quick for one of his apparent weight.

His face was sun and wind-tanned, with plenty of mountain soil on top of that. A cartridge-belt encircled the loose jacket he wore and a revolver handle protruded from the pistol pocket of his trousers.

"What's the word?" he asked, gruffly, as he came up to Liu.

"Go on in," replied Liu.

Jimmie saw evidences of treachery in the hostile attitude of the newcomer and retreated farther into the cavern.

Then he saw Liu doubling up with laughter and stopped. It didn't look very amusing to him, especially as the stranger was advancing toward him with swift strides. Then something remotely familiar in the set of the shoulders, the carriage of the head, attracted his closer attention to the figure and he moved forward a step.

"You're a nice little boy to get into a trap like this!"

There was no mistaking that voice. Just how Ned Nestor had secured that disguise and found his way to that spot Jimmie did not stop to think. He knew that it was his chum, and that was enough. While the two boys clasped hands Liu stood regarding them smilingly, at the same time watching the entrance.

"How did you ever find this hole?" Jimmie asked, his wonder at the thing which had happened mastering all else.

"I saw this cave when my machine dropped into a hole in the air in the cañon," was the reply. "The shelf where we landed is just above this cavern. There was a fire in the outer room, and numerous Chinamen were moving about."

"They're opium smugglers," Jimmie said.

"Man smugglers!" laughed Ned.

"Do you mean that they bring Chinks over the border here, an' so run them down into civilization whenever they get a chance?" demanded Jimmie.

"That is just it," Ned answered. "We seem to have come upon a lot of the articles to be smuggled," he added.

"How did you come across Liu?" Jimmie asked.

"Oh, I met him while I was prowling about not far from the cave, at daylight," was the reply. "He helped me get this disguise."

Liu was still watching at the mouth of the cavern, so the boys talked freely, with little fear of being disturbed. Ned told of his return to the camp, and of the all-night hunt for the missing boy. It took Ned and Frank a long time to find the opening the former had seen in his swift drop down the cañon, but about daylight it was located.

They had, however, found many Chinamen loitering about, and Frank had gone back to camp to reassure the others, while Ned remained on the eastern side on the chance of getting into

communication with Jimmie. While loitering about Liu had come up the slope.

It was quite a long story, that of his getting a perfect understanding with Liu, and Ned cut it as short as possible, merely saying that Liu had recognized his name, having heard his associates mention it frequently. Then the Chinese boy had procured the disguise and Ned had stuffed out the shoulders of the coat to give it a better fit.

"I was observed by a half a dozen men, some Americans, some Chinamen, while getting in here," Ned said, then, "but the disguise misled them. Now, the question is this: How are we going to get out?"

"We'll have to fight our way out?" asked Jimmie.

"It won't answer," Ned replied. "They are too many for us."

Liu now came into the second cave and held up his hand for silence.

"You'll have to hide in the back chamber," he said. "Chang is coming in."

"I thought this was the back chamber," Jimmie said.

"I suspect," Liu said, "that there's a chain of caves running through the divide. Come on!"

Liu passed back to the west, removed a great box which stood against the rear wall, and disclosed an opening through which the patrol leader crawled. When the box was replaced Ned stopped and listened. What he heard was the click of a typewriter.

CHAPTER XIII.

OFF ON A DESPERATE MISSION.

What business calling for the use of a typewriter was being transacted under the main divide of the Rocky Mountains?

Ned stood perfectly still in the darkness and listened. He could hear the click of the keys and nothing else. At length he moved stealthily forward over an even surface, feeling his way in order that he might not trip over some unseen obstruction and raise a racket in a tumble.

Presently he came to a rug hanging at the end of the chamber in which he was. From the other side of the rug came a faint light. The noise of the keys was more distinct here, and the boy knew that he had at least located the operator.

While he stood listening and undecided as to what course to pursue, the noise of the machine ceased and the operator—a young, well-dressed American—came toward him carrying a lighted candle in his hand. Ned crouched down in an angle of the wall and waited for him to pass.

The boy was not quite so anxious now to leave the strange rendezvous in which he found himself. Some mischief greater than smuggling opium and Chinamen over the border might be carried on there. His work seemed to be growing on his hands!

He had been sent to that district to investigate the cause of the frequent forest fires, and given an aeroplane in order that he might fly over the forests in making his observations. It seemed to him now, as he lay on his side against a wall of rock, waiting for the typist to pass with his light, that he was spending more time under the ground than in the air!

The main range of the Rocky Mountains in the northern part of Montana is noted for its rugged and irregular formation. It is declared by some that the home of the original cave dwellers was here. Many of the great cañons are known to be honeycombed with openings almost large enough to hide a small city in.

The typist moved straight ahead and his light disappeared from view. Then Ned advanced beyond the rug, which appeared to be of fine material, and flashed on his light. There was a table in the room, a couple of chairs, a row of pigeon-holes attached to the wall.

On the table was a typewriter, in the pigeonholes were folded papers, neatly ticketed and enclosed in rubber bands. Aside from the underground smell the place was tolerably comfortable. The air was damp and chilly, but Ned was well clothed and did not mind that.

As has been said, the boy was now in no haste to leave the place. He believed that the mystery he had been sent out to solve would be solved there. For an hour or more he searched over the place, opening the folded papers and making a close examination of the typewriter and the stock of unused paper in the drawer of the table.

At length, his examination completed, he passed back into the chamber behind the rug and listened at the opening through which he had entered. A sound of the steady beat of blows reached his ears at first, then a low whistle. That was Jimmie, he knew. The lad had a habit of whistling softly to himself, usually without time or tune.

Waiting for a lull in the blows, he rapped softly on the box which backed up against the opening. Instantly the whistling ceased, and Jimmie's voice was heard.

"Come on out," the boy said. "I've been kicking my heels against this box for an hour, waitin' for you to signal back."

"Be sure there is no one watching," Ned cautioned.

He heard Jimmie walking away, then heard him coming back. In a moment the box was drawn away from the opening.

"You've been in there long enough to dig through to China," Jimmie said, as Ned stood by his side. "What did you find in there?"

"A double keyboard typewriter," grinned Ned.

"Quit your kiddin'," answered Jimmie. "You'll be claimin' next that you found a brass band in there."

Ned did not stop to explain to the boy all that he had discovered in the inner chamber. His work there seemed to be finished now, and he was anxious to get back to camp. There was no knowing what had been going on there during his absence.

"Where is Liu?" he asked.

"Watchin' outside," was the reply. "He's my guard. Goin' to shoot me if I try to get away."

"And the others?" asked Ned.

"Don't know," replied Jimmie. "They herded a lot of Chinks an' went off down the valley."

Liu now appeared in the entrance, bowed gravely to the boys, and stepped out on the ledge, with a Boy Scout challenge in the wave of his hand.

"He's all right!" Jimmie said. "You ought to see the breakfast he got up for me. That feller can cook—an' then some!"

"Call him," Ned suggested, "and we'll see if it is safe for me to go out."

"For you to go out!" repeated Jimmie. "For us to go out."

"I think you'd better remain here," Ned replied.

Jimmie looked at his chum in amazement. The light back there was not good, but Ned saw several questions in the boy's eyes.

"Liu can protect you, can't he?" Ned asked.

"That's what I don't know," was the reply. "He will do his best, of course, but his best might not be good enough."

Ned was thinking fast. If he permitted the boy to leave, the fact of his escape would be likely to scatter the outlaws—and he very much wished to keep them together for a short time.

"I think," he said, "that we have found the men we want—with the goods. If you leave now they will make a quick getaway. You see that, don't you?"

"Of course," was the reply. "An' I see, too, that if I remain I'm the one that's likely to make a quick getaway—to a country no one comes back from."

"There may be some other way," Ned said, thoughtfully. "Give me a chance to think it over."

"Oh, I'll stay, all right," Jimmie went on, "if it will do any good. I guess they won't eat me alive."

As he spoke the boy put his hand to his eyes and gave them a long rub.

"There's smoke in here," he said. "Don't you smell it?"

"I was thinking of that," Ned replied, anxiously. "There may be a fire in the cañon."

Regardless of consequences, Jimmie rushed to the ledge and looked out. The sun was no longer in sight, for a mist of smoke hung over the cañon and over the slope to the east.

"There's goin' to be the biggest blaze ever!" Jimmie cried.

Liu came to the side of the boys and pointed to the south.

"The fire came through a gully over there," he said. "I was watching it from here. It was not put out yesterday, and worked its way over the divide. When it gets to going strong here no one can live in this cavern. I'm going to get out."

"That's the idea!" Jimmie cried.

The cañon was a veritable fire trap. For years the boughs and the turp of the trees had been dropping down. Ned knew that the blaze would mount to the cavern and be drawn into it. The atmosphere of the place indicated openings at the rear which would serve as chimneys.

"Oh, the devils!" Jimmie cried. "To set a fire like that!"

"They didn't set it, I tell you," insisted Liu, speaking as if in the defense of his employers.

"Who did, then?" demanded Jimmie, half angrily.

"It came through from the other side, just as I told you," replied Liu, with the utmost good nature. "There'll be a pass through the range some day where the fire found its way through."

"But they set the fire on the other side," Jimmie urged. "They set it for the purpose of burning our aeroplane an' driving us out of the district. When we go out of the district they'll go with us, wearin' steel bracelets!" he added.

"I rather think," Liu said, "that they set the fires over there to draw the foresters away from this section, and so protect their business. That is what they have been doing right along."

"Yes," Ned said, "there has been a forest fire for every cargo of opium, for every gang of Chinamen, that has been brought in over the border."

"So that is the real trouble?" asked Jimmie. "How do you know so much about it?"

Ned smiled and pointed to the slope to the east, where columns of fire were cutting their way through the timber.

"It strikes me," he said, "that now is a pretty good time for us to get out of this. The outlaws won't come back so long as this danger exists, and we shall not be missed for a long time —or rather, Liu and Jimmie will not be missed."

"They'll think we ran out to escape the heat and lost our lives in the fire," Liu said.

Ned stood hesitatingly at the mouth of the cavern while Liu gathered a few articles he wanted to take with him.

"If I thought the fire would reach the cave when the big trees in the cañon get to going," he mused, "I'd go back and get the papers—or more of them."

"It surely will get into the cave," Liu said. "You see, the summit scoops down here quite a lot, and the timber line is almost to the top. The gulch below is quite high up on this elevation, still it is not so very high as compared with some of the summits to the north and south. So, you see, the timber line here is capable of getting up a good deal of a blaze, especially where the cañons are full of trees. The fire will come up here, all right."

Ned darted away, was gone a minute or so, and returned with hands full of folded papers.

"What you got?" demanded Jimmie.

Ned laughed but made no satisfactory reply. After stowing the papers away in the numerous pockets of his borrowed suit, he led the way down the ledge, away from the cave he had first seen in his fall down the cañon, and which had proved so profitable to his search.

The air was now filled with smoke. The cañon below was not yet in full flame, but a column of destruction was creeping upon it from the south. It seemed to Ned that there were

numerous small fires, though how this could be true he could not understand.

The boys made their way along the ledge without coming upon any of the men who had occupied the cavern. It was evident that the few left after the departure of the men with the Chinamen had fled before the clouds of smoke. The ledge wound up on the plateau from which Ned had dropped the night before, and here they paused to decide on some course of action.

The light breeze was from the west, so the fires below were in a measure protected from it by the bulk of the summit, but Ned knew that the heat would in time bring the air into the burning spaces with a rush, merging the little blazes into one gigantic one which might repeat the disasters of August, 1910.

Now and then, from far to the east, there came a signal in the shape of a gunshot. The faithful foresters were at work there, trying to head off the advancing flames before they passed beyond control. The place to combat a forest fire, of course, is ahead of it, and not where the red line is running through the sputtering timber.

"If I could get the aeroplane," Ned said, as he looked over the country from the plateau, "I might get to the fighting line and do some good."

"Where is it?" asked Liu.

"At the camp."

"The others won't dare bring it out, of course?" asked Liu.

"Doubtful," Ned replied. "Frank has always taken a great interest in the machine, and was studying its mechanism when I left, but I don't think he will attempt to operate it. He ought not to, anyway."

"If the men who left here to pinch the boys," Jimmie said, "showed up at the camp, an' Frank got a chance to mount the aeroplane, you bet your life he's shootin' through the air with it this minute, or hidin' in some valley."

"But there were three of them," Ned urged, "and all couldn't ride."

"They'd try!" gritted Jimmie, "unless Pat got cold feet an' run away."

Ned glanced up at the sky, now very thick with smoke, as the boy spoke. He looked with indifference at first, then with interest, then with anxiety. There was a shape moving up there, coming slowly toward the plateau.

"There they are!" shouted Jimmie, whose attention had been attracted to the sky by Ned's fixed gaze. "Frank's runnin' the machine. I'll

bet dollars to apples that he'll dump her into the cañon when he tries to land here."

The aeroplane, indeed, looked as if there were an uncertain hand at the helm. She wavered, tipped in the air currents, dipped wickedly, circled staggeringly, but finally swooped down on the plateau and, more by good luck than good handling, settled down within a dozen feet of the lip of the cañon. Frank and Jack were aboard. Pat, they said, had taken to his heels at the first suggestion of his joining the others in the ride.

Ned examined the machine carefully and found it in excellent shape, although the gasoline was getting low.

"Better go an' get some," Jimmie suggested.

Ned looked toward the line of smoke off to the east.

"We can reach the firing line with what we have," he said, in a moment, "and that may be sufficient for the present."

"What you goin' to do?" demanded the boy.

"Going to see if I can't help fight this fire," was the reply.

"From here?" laughed Jack.

Ned indicated a distant line of hills where the forest still stood green on the slopes.

"We'll fight the fire from there," he said. "We can see the location well enough now, but the smoke will soon shut it out from here."

"What can we do when we get there?" asked Jack. "We are safe enough here. The smoke and heat may scorch us a little, but we'll live through it, and that is more than we can say about the safety of the place you point out."

"Pat will be making his way here," Ned said, "and you may as well remain here and meet him. I'll take Frank and go over to the place where the foresters are fighting the blaze."

Jimmie was on his feet in an instant.

"Me for the ride with you!" he shouted.

"Some one may have to run the machine back," Ned said. "You can't do that, my little man, and Frank can, so Frank goes."

"I don't see what you can do over there that the foresters can't do," Liu said.

"There is no knowing how useful the aeroplane may be," Ned said.

Then the machine was rolled back as far up the plateau as possible, the boys took their seats, and then they were lost in the dense clouds of smoke in the sky.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BATTLE IN THE AIR.

The smoke was driving fiercely through the green trees on the slope, and the line of fire was not far in the rear. Every moment the wind gained force, every minute the flames leaped higher and faster.

The foresters felling trees and clearing a space at an advantageous point some distance in advance of the flames were working blindly, mechanically. The heat was intense, the smoke suffocating, irritating, blinding. The shirts of the workers were open at the throat, their coats had long ago been lost as they had been beaten back from one stand to another.

Now and then a worker dropped senseless in his tracks, his lips cracked with the heat, his face blistered, his tongue lolling from his smarting mouth like that of an overworked horse. Then the men who were able to move and understand would carry him back to a spot of supposed safety and return to re-engage in the almost hopeless fight, the battle which the flames were winning in every charge and sally.

The aeroplane, after a narrow escape from destruction, landed on a little rise of ground back of the working line when the wind lulled for an instant, and hope shone in the faces of the astonished men who gathered about to greet the unexpected arrivals.

"We can master it," Green, the leader, said, after many questions had been asked and answered, "if we can be supplied with water. We wasted our supply wetting our clothes a long time ago, and are suffering."

"Get us water," shouted another, "and we'll win yet."

"There's a spring three miles away," Green went on, speaking in Ned's ear, for the roaring of the flames drowned all ordinary conversation. "If you can take our water bottles there and fill them we can beat this blaze. If you can't we've got to retreat and let the whole district burn over."

"I have very little gasoline," Ned replied, "but I'll try."

"We sent two men out not long ago," Green continued, thrusting his scorched face close to the boy's. "We sent them out with water bags, but there are no trails, and it will take them hours to make the spring and return. With

your aeroplane you ought to do it within half an hour."

"Fire fighters marooned without a supply of water, or a trail cut to a spring!" shouted Frank, scornfully. "Great head some one in authority has!"

"There are no trails, no telephones, no horses!" cried Green. "It looks as if the government sent us here to die. Hurry up with that water."

"If the gasoline holds out," Ned said, loading a dozen water bags on the machine, "I'll be back here in less than half an hour, bar accidents."

"There is plenty of gasoline back there in the shanty," cried Green. "We have been using it lately in starting back fires, but the wind is now too strong for that. Get a move on, and take all you want."

In a short space of time, but not without great risk, the tanks of the aeroplane were filled, and then Ned took in the general situation in the sky. The wind was blowing in puffs, but it was certain that a miniature tornado was at hand. He thought he could reach the spring, which had been described as lying to the southeast, but was not certain that he could make his way back.

He believed, however, that by flying either very low or very high up, so as to get all the protection possible from the mountain, or escape the sweep of wind just above the fire, he might be able to bring in one load of water before the worst of the wind storm came. He knew that it was an almost unheard of thing to even try to navigate the air in such a gale, but human lives were at stake, and he decided to try.

"You'll have to help me up against this wind," Ned said to Green. "If I start with the air current I'll be carried too far to the east before my power begins to become effective. If I can hold my own against the wind until I get above the smoke I think I can win the game."

It was a desperate expedient, but it appeared to be the only possible one. If the men had water they might succeed in stopping the fire and saving millions of dollars worth of timber. If the fire gained the upper hand they might lose their lives. The men cleared and smoothed a path for the run of the wheels, by great exertion sent the machine along at good speed, and then stood and watched it with anxiety depicted in their faces.

The great white bird quivered in the face of the wind, but the motors were true to their duty

and the rudder held. To turn about in the face of that rush would be impossible, so Ned worked his levers guardedly and kept the wings as level as he could. Now and then a swirl of heated air would shake the hopes of those watching below, but in the end the aeroplane drifted slowly ahead, up, higher up, and was lost in the smoke.

"The lad is worth his weight in gold!" shouted Green. "He'll do it! I know he'll do it!"

"Powerful motor," one of the foresters said. "When we saw the machine last she was actually holding her own against the wind."

This was, indeed, the fact, but the wind was not as strong in the higher levels as at the upper limit of the heat from the fires. A great fire usually brings a great wind, as those who witnessed the burning of Chicago and San Francisco well know. The hot air rises, forming a partial vacuum, and the colder air rushes in.

Ned and Frank gained the spring, filled their water bags and started back. It was no easy task to land near the spring in that whirl of wind, nor yet an easy task to get the aeroplane into the air again, but the feats were accomplished. Often after that exciting day the boys declared that they had no idea how they ever did it.

"We were excited," Frank would say, "and took chances, everything worked in our favor, and we loaded the water. We knew that lives were at stake, and it seemed that we had the strength of a score of men, and the cool heads of men far beyond all excitement. I never saw anything like the way Ned handled the levers. The wings and the rudders seemed to me to work on a brain suggestion rather than on a movement of the levers."

But the most difficult part of the journey still remained to be accomplished after the water had been secured. The 'plane was much heavier and did not respond so readily to the hand of the driver, and the return course was quartering against the wind. Ned, however, did not attempt to move directly toward the destination he sought.

Instead he sailed off to the south, working west as much as possible. He tacked as a yacht tacks in the wind and came near upsetting several times. He found it impossible to sail low on account of the eddies and currents created by the heat, and so lifted the machine far up into the air. It was better sailing there, and he managed to get as far west as he thought necessary.

But he could not see the landing place. Below was an ocean of smoke, the waves heaving in the touch of the wind, the edges now and then tipped with flame. Above the sun smiled at him, and the birds flew excitedly about, peering down at the threatening roll of clouds.

"I'm afraid," Frank said, grasping an upright and clinging to the water bags.

"I never was so frightened in my life," Ned called back, lifting his voice so that it might be heard above the snapping of the motors.

"I didn't finish," Frank called back, his heart thumping loudly. "I wanted to say that I was afraid we'd sweep past the workers when we descended into the smoke and the swifter breeze near the earth."

"I said just what I wanted to say," Ned answered. "I never was half so scared in all my life."

Yet his hand on the lever was steady, his brain was as cool as if he had been sitting in the Wolf Patrol club room in New York. He knew that the dip of a wing a foot lower than he intended might send them both into the blazing forest below. He was afraid, but not with a shrinking, physical fear, but afraid because he understood the peril he was in—because he knew that

upon his efforts depended the lives of the heroes in the heated hell below.

"We've got to go into that mess of smoke, I suppose?" shouted Frank.

"There is no other way," Ned called back. "We've got to dip down low enough to see the line of fire and take our chances on landing where the fighters are. You understand that they are farther to the east than when we left them?"

"Of course they have been driven back," Frank said. "I never thought of that. We may not be able to find them at all."

Ned shut his teeth and settled his jaw.

"We've got to find them," he said.

A long, sullen roaring, like the beating of waves on a beach in a storm, now reached the boys' ears, even shutting out the chattering of the motors. It came from the west, and passed along, as it seemed, below the level held by the aeroplane, now high up in the air.

"If we don't get down there pretty soon," Ned said, shouting, "we will be too late. That wind will join the different fires and make one roaring mass of the whole northwest. I wish I knew just how far the foresters have been driven back."

"Do you know where to look for them, north or south?" asked Frank.

"There is a peak to the west and one to the east," was the reply. "They are on a line with the two. But the trouble is that we can't see the peaks after we drop down into the smoke."

"There appears to be a little lull in the wind now," Frank said, shutting his lips tight, as a man does when about to make a sudden plunge into unknown waters.

The remark was suggestive. Ned knew by it that his chum had braced himself for the dash.

"Here we go, then," Ned replied. "Remember that we'll go about eighty miles an hour when I turn the motor on full head, and that we can't be more than five miles from the spot where we left them, so keep your eyes out."

The aeroplane dipped gracefully as Ned touched the lever. In a minute the boys were surrounded by smoke. It was hot smoke, too, and made breathing difficult. Their eyes smarted until their faces were wet with nature's protest against such irritation of the organs of sight. The chuck-chuck, snap-snap of the motors was in their ears, the seats they occupied—frail rests between life and death—shivered under the pulsations of the machine.

Now and then the aeroplane dipped frightfully, but the wings and the rudders brought it back again.

"Can you see the earth yet?" asked Frank, in an awed tone, which sounded like a whisper in that clatter.

"We seem to be over the fire," Ned returned.

And that was all. There was no need of conversation. In all their lives they would never be so near to a frightful death as they were then.

First they caught sight of a rocky ridge. Ned knew where that was, and realized that he was still in the direct line of the workers. Beyond this ridge, he knew, was a valley, so he must drop down. The workers were on a level beyond the valley, a great plain of fir and pine between gigantic ranges of the Rocky Mountains.

The aeroplane trembled as she dropped, swiftly, apparently straight down. Frank grasped his upright and prepared to spring out of the wreckage when it fell, if there was anything to fall from after the trees had had their way with the frail machine.

The smoke was blinding. Nothing could be seen but smoke for a time. Then the dark gray

clouds turned red, and Ned knew that he was nearing the advance line of the fire, and that it was mounting to the very tops of the giant trees on the plain—or elevated plateau, rather, for, though comparatively smooth of surface and heavily timbered, it was far above sea level.

If you look on an enlarged map of northern Montana you will see that the Rocky Mountains do not consist of one great, massive range. There are ridges and valleys, and plateaus extending for hundreds of miles along the British frontier. There are peaks from which the snow never disappears, and there are timber lines which crawl almost to the summit of other peaks. There are fertile valleys where cattle grow fat, and great gorges where beasts of prey await their victims in thickets.

It is the timber on this great stretch of country that the United States government is trying to save.

The heat was blistering now, and Ned feared for the safety of his gasoline tanks. At a motion from him Frank removed his coat, carefully, for a slight movement in the air is sometimes productive of disastrous results, placed it over the tanks, after a great effort, and managed to saturate it with water from one of the bags.

Through the smoke a line of tree tops now came into view, low down, and the boys knew that they had passed the fire line. Ned tried to slow down, but found that he must keep the motors going in order to retain control of the machine.

"There's a clear space ahead!" Frank shouted, and Ned dropped. Then a giant trunk obtruded itself, and the boy tried to dip and whirl so as to dodge it, but the pressure of the wind was too strong.

The machine headed straight for the tree, which seemed to Frank to be about a thousand feet high.

"Hang on to the first thing that comes to your hands if she strikes!" Ned shouted. "But stick to the 'plane as long as she is clear. There may be a current of air which will sweep us away from that tree."

"Here's hoping!" Frank gasped back, and then the smoke shut out the view, making the situation doubly dangerous.

CHAPTER XV.

TOLD BY THE FOREST RANGER.

The rangers, almost exhausted, were fighting the fire desperately, hoping against hope, when the cyclone—it amounted at times almost to that—struck the forest. Then they knew that the fight was lost for the time being.

It was now a question of escaping from the flames they had been battling with. The chief foresters knew very well that there was a way to safety, but they had under their command many rangers who had joined the service merely for the adventures they anticipated meeting, and these, they understood, would be hard to manage.

When the order came to drop everything and fall back some of the new men accused those in authority of cowardice and kept on in the course mapped out for them under entirely different conditions. Two of them even insisted on starting back to the rough shanty and preparing dinner. They lost their way in the blazing inferno, and their bones were found two weeks

later, at the foot of a tree which had been burned into a stub, but which had not fallen.

When the danger became apparent to Green who was in charge of the company found by Nestor, he ordered his men into a "burn" of half a dozen acres in extent. By "burn" is meant a patch of forest which has been cleared by fire the previous year. This "burn" was entirely stripped of trees. The fire had done its work well, but had been checked before spreading.

The men could hear trees falling as they dashed along. The fire was screaming, the wind whistling and roaring. Coals of fire, driven like arrows by the wind, hit the men in the back as they rushed toward safety. At last the "burn" was gained, and the men threw themselves face down on the ground. At the eastern edge there were large logs which had not been entirely consumed, and some of the men lay down behind them.

The air was so hot that it cut the lungs like acid. Above, across the old "burn," streamed a river of flame, now racing like a mountain torrent, now dropping sullenly back to the west, like a fiery ceiling which had been rolled away. On such occasions the fainting foresters below

could catch a breath of fresh air and a hazy view of the sky.

Some of the men, half crazed by their sufferings, arose to their feet and shook clenched hands at the blazing forests, at the brassy sky, and the green hills away to the east. Green crept from one to another and whispered that the only hope of life lay in keeping on the ground.

Once when he was creeping toward a man who was moaning in anguish and despair he turned his eyes upward to the sky, clear for an instant, for the wind was wayward after a time, and saw a speck sweeping out of the west, dropping lower and lower, whirling in the wind, racing like an express train.

"Dan," he whispered to the man he was trying to comfort, "get a brace! There's no use of giving up now. Why, man, the fight is won, and Nestor is coming back with water!"

"Impossible!" grunted the other. "Impossible—in this wind!"

"Then look," Green said.

A sheet of flame swept over the "burn," lay upon it for an instant like a red-hot roof, and then warped and twisted itself away.

"I see," Dan said, looking into the sky again, "but he can't land. Impossible—in this storm!"

"Wait and see!" Green said, and sank back to the earth.

The aeroplane circled, high up, like a bird seeking its prey in the burning forest. The wind was tolerably steady at that height, but Ned knew that when he came into the lower current he would meet conditions which he could not understand.

"There's a place to drop!" Frank shouted to him, pointing ahead to the "burn," which seemed only a few yards away.

The aeroplane had missed the tree which had threatened it by an inch, and had turned upward again, for there were other trees in the way of a descent there. The "burn" was the first free spot that had been observed, and, besides, it lay inside the line Ned had figured as leading to the foresters.

"Hang on!" Ned cried.

The aeroplane plunged down, almost vertically, and Frank felt as if he was standing on his head.

"Don't jump when it strikes the ground," Ned commanded.

Watched by a score of anxious eyes—for the foresters under Green had all been told of the coming relief—the aeroplane shot down, struck

the ground at the center of the "burn," rolled swiftly for a few yards, and stopped. At that moment the space above filled with flame.

Both boys threw themselves on the ground and waited. When the fierce gust was over the men gathered about them eagerly.

"Did you make it?" asked Green.

"Yes," Ned replied. "Get the bags out and distribute the water. Don't let the men waste it."

"I'll see to that," cried Green.

Without the water, without the cooling sips, without the wet cloths held over nose and mouth, without the saturated sponges laid on scorched heads, the men would have died there in the forest. Presently, when the consumption of the timber to the west reduced the heat, when the wind quieted down in a measure, they were ready for another fight with the flames, and it was owing largely to their exertions that the fire was extinguished before millions of acres had been burned over.

"It is a dream!" Green exclaimed, that afternoon, as he stood by Ned and the aeroplane. "I don't believe yet that you did it."

"I don't see how I did," laughed Ned. "Anyhow, I'm sure I couldn't do it again. I

guess Providence took the matter into his own hands. Honestly, I do not believe any human strength or skill could do what was done with the aeroplane to-day. It was a miracle."

"I know of a nervy boy who had something to do with the miracle," said Green.

Ned was naturally anxious regarding Pat, Jack and Jimmie, but believed they would show up in good form whenever he got back to the vicinity of the place where they had been left. When the boys were in camp with the rangers that night, Ned asked Frank about Pat's idea of safety after refusing to go up in the aeroplane.

"He said he would stay about the valley," Frank replied. "There is plenty of provisions there, you know, and Pat is quite long on the eats," he added, with a laugh.

"And Jack and Jimmie will be sure to hang about the neighborhood of the caves," Ned said. "The Chinese boy, Liu, will be able to care for them. If there is enough gasoline in the tanks, I may go back to the valley to-night."

"You'd better get some sleep to-night," Frank advised. "I don't know how long it has been since you settled down for a night of it. If you keep your brain working right you've got to sleep."

"I really ought to go to San Francisco," was the astonishing reply to this advice. "I have work to do there."

"What work?" demanded Frank.

"You see," Ned answered, "we have done nothing yet, except discover a crime with which we are supposed to have nothing to do. We have brought a little water for the fire-fighters, but we came here for a certain purpose, and we have not made good as yet. Perhaps, when I get to Frisco, I can hunch my wits, as the base-ball fans say, and report good progress."

"I don't understand what you mean," Frank said.

"I am not sufficiently sure of my ground to attempt an explanation now," Ned replied.

"Of course," Frank said, thoughtfully, "there's the murder case you went to Frisco about before. You might look that up again, but I can't see where that has any bearing on this forest fire business."

"You may be surprised," Ned said, "when the end comes. Somehow, I have an idea that the two crimes dovetail into each other."

"Nothing stirring!" laughed Frank. "They don't seem to me to match. Still, you may have information I do not possess."

An hour later, after the not very elaborate supper had been eaten, Green came to the little tent which had been set aside for Ned and Frank. He had not wholly escaped the dangers of the day unscathed. There were burns on his hands and face, and one of his feet was bandaged.

"Shoe burned through," he said, shortly. "I shall have to walk with a crutch for several days."

"You won't like that," Ned suggested.

"No, indeed," was the reply, "especially as I would like to be moving about in order to see what has happened to the other boys."

"Have you heard from any of the other groups?" asked Ned.

"Howard came in from the north," was the reply. "Three men killed up there. The fire caught them unawares. One of my men has gone south, but it will be some hours before I hear from him."

"I am afraid there were several lives lost," Ned said. "In the morning I'll fly about and see what I can learn."

"What I came here to talk about," Green said, after a pause, "is this. I want to know what you think of the Chinks?"

"The Chinese fire-fighters?" asked Ned.

Green laughed quietly for a moment before replying. Then:

"They told you that, did they?"

Ned nodded. He wanted to jump into the subject without waiting for Green to have his say, for he was greatly interested, but prudence told him to listen to the forester first.

"Yes," he said. "They told me that."

"Also that they were foresters—the men who told the story about the Chinks, I mean?"

"Yes, one of them claimed to be in charge of this district."

"Well, you know better than that now, so there is no use in talking about that. You saw some of the Chinks?"

"Certainly. I even had the honor of visiting their residence."

Frank laughed, wondering what sort of a story Ned would have to tell him when they were alone again.

"It is a wonder you ever got out again," Green said.

"I left under the excitement of the fire," Ned said. "It was easy enough."

"Do you know where the Chinks have gone?" asked Green.

"I think I do," was the reply.

"To San Francisco?"

"Yes, some of them. Others to Portland, I think."

"Smuggled in?"

"Of course, though it seems odd that they should want to cross the border so far away from civilization. It must be expensive getting them in over such a route."

"The men at the bottom of the game are watched," Green said. "Watched so closely that they are obliged to keep out of the actual work and do their business through unsuspected channels. After this place has been raided they will try some other point."

"You know what has been going on then?" asked Ned, surprised that the matter, as understood by the forester, had not been reported to him by the Secret Service man in San Francisco.

"Yes," was the reply.

"And you have reported to your superior officers?"

Green nodded, and Ned began to feel provoked at the strange attitude taken by the government in the matter. Surely he should have been posted as to conditions in the district before being sent on.

"Why wasn't I informed of this new element in the case?" he asked.

"Well," Green replied, "the officials have an idea that the men who are running the Chinks and the opium in are the men who are responsible for the forest fires. In fact, I have so reported to them for a long time."

"Go on," the puzzled boy requested.

"You see," Green continued, "I might go and pick up a couple of dozen Chinks almost any month, and capture a lot of opium, and arrest a few men caught with the goods on, but, don't you see, that wouldn't end the game?"

"I see that," Ned answered.

"There is a man at the head of this game who is working from behind the scenes somewhere," Green hastened to say. "I don't know who he is. The officials at San Francisco don't know who he is, or where he is. The big guns at Washington know just about as much regarding the head center of the game as we do. Well, that is what you were sent here for—to get down to cases, as I used to say on South Clark street, Chicago."

"It was thoughtful of them not to interrupt the game until I got here," Ned said.

"Yes, I thought so," Green went on. "I thought that any man, or boy, coming here to get to the bottom of this thing would want us to leave a few ropes hanging out for him to climb down. You found 'em."

"Yes, I found them," Ned replied. "I found the counterfeit foresters and the Chinks, as you call them, and I found something else."

"That is what we expected you would do," Green said, after a moment's hesitation. "We wanted you to begin without pointers, with a brain free of all the unsuccessful schemes which have been worked. You see, I know a great deal about it, my boy," he added with a laugh. "I knew, days ago, that you would be here. When I saw the aeroplane in the sky I knew who was in charge of it."

"What is the next move?" asked the boy.

"That is for you to say," was the reply. "I am under orders to follow any reasonable instructions from you. It is for you to suggest something."

"Well," Ned said, "that brings me to a point I was studying over when you came in. I was wondering if you would detail men to do certain things for me."

"Sure I will. If Washington has confidence enough in you to put you in charge of the blindest case in history, why shouldn't I have equal confidence in you? You bet I'll be there with the oxen when you give the word."

"I thank you," Ned replied. "What I want now is men enough to guard two points. One is a cave near Lake Kintla, and the other is the cavern where the Chinese have been hiding."

"How many men?" asked Green.

"Two to each place. If there is need of more, others should be ready to assist."

"I wish you all success," Green said, after the details of the surveillance had been arranged. "We have located the tools, and now it is for you to let down to bed rock. The government wants the headpiece of this game, and believes that you can put your finger on him. Half a dozen inspectors have failed, but I have faith in you, boy."

"Well," Ned replied, "I am glad of your confidence, and thankful for the help you promise, and will only say that the man behind the scenes will soon be brought out. I think I know his 'cue'!" he added, with a laugh.

"Already?" asked Green.

"I am only expressing confidence in the clues I now hold," Ned said in reply. "It may be that the next clues I find will point the other way."

Green shook hands with the boys and went to his tent. It was a clear night up above the mountain tops, but down where the boys were the smoke of consumed forests lay on the ground like the gray ghost of fallen trees. Off to the west the summit of the Rocky Mountains—or one of the summits—lifted itself above the smudge, standing like a giant up to his neck in gray dust.

"Over there," Frank said, "is Pat—hungry, if you want to know, and nearer are Jack and Jimmie. I wish we could hear from them."

"If the ground wasn't still red hot back there," Ned said, "Jimmie would be sure to find us "

"By the way," Frank said, presently, "what did you mean when you told Green that you had a 'cue' which would bring out the man behind the scenes?"

"I meant that I have blundered on a clue which promises well," was the reply. "And now," he said, yawning, "I'm going to bed. Rather warm, but I think I'll sleep, all right."

In five minutes Ned was sound asleep and Frank was about to lie down by his side when Green made his appearance. The forester noted the sleeping boy and laid a finger on his lips.

"Let him sleep," he said. "And come out here and see if you know anything about the fellow that is tampering with the aeroplane."

"What is he doing to it?" whispered Frank.

"Acts like he was preparing to take a trip in it," was the reply.

The words were followed by the rattle of the motors.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW A CAT TREED A WOLF.

Smoke still hung over the "burn." Now and then it was swept aside by a gust of wind which seemed now to blow out of the east, and so did not come sizzling with the heat of burned forests. The general effect, however, was that of a heavy, stifling fog, and Green and Frank crept along toward the aeroplane with their hands held out before their faces.

The clatter of the motors had ceased, but the tap-tap of steel on steel was faintly heard as they neared the machine. Occasionally the worker, whoever he was, ceased his tapping, as if listening.

"He's got his nerve with him," Frank whispered, as they moved along.

"How did he get here?" asked Green. "That is the question that is troubling me."

Presently the two came up so that the figure of the man could be discerned, standing before the bulk of the planes. Green sprang forward and seized him by the arm. For an instant it

seemed as if the capture would be made without a struggle, then a shot was fired and a crouching figure leaped away.

Frank saw the forester fall and leaped toward the retreating figure. The race in the darkness, caused by the pall of smoke which followed, was short, for Frank was a noted runner and soon overhauled the fugitive. He did not attempt to take hold of the man as he came up. He knew that such a course might mean an unequal contest, for he was only a boy.

Instead, he dropped to the ground and caught one of the runner's ankles in both hands. Naturally the fellow plunged to the ground headfirst. He turned quickly and leveled a revolver. There was no warning. The shot came instantly, the bullet passing over the boy's head as he dropped upon the prostrate figure.

With the hand which held the weapon held closely to the ground, Frank struggled with the fellow for an instant, filling the heavy air with his cries for assistance. The first shot had been heard by the sleepers, and help was at hand immediately. The captive was neatly tied by the light of Frank's flashlight, and the foresters gathered about, still rubbing their eyes.

The "burn" was not all in darkness all the time, for the glare of the smouldering embers to

the west lighted the place fairly well. Only for the smoke the ruddy light would have made a pretty good illumination. When the fellow was lifted to his feet an exclamation of astonishment came from the group about him.

"Sawyer!" some one cried.

The prisoner dropped his chin for a moment, as if studying out some difficult proposition, then faced the others sheepishly.

"I thought I could get away with it," he said.

A cry now came from the men who had hastened to Green's assistance.

"He's dead, I guess," the voice said.

"I didn't shoot to kill," Sawyer exclaimed. "He can't be dead."

"Why did you shoot at all?" demanded one of the rangers, approaching Sawyer with threatening fists.

"He was in my way," was the sullen reply. "I have always wanted an aeroplane, and I thought this a good time to get one."

"Did you injure the machine in any way?" asked Frank, as Sawyer stood gazing furtively from face to face, his black eyes showing fear.

"When I found I couldn't get it off," was the reply, "I loosened some of the burrs. It can be repaired easily enough."

"That is more than can be said for you, if you have killed Green," one of the men declared, shaking a fist at the prisoner. "If he's dead you'll be hauled up on one of these trees."

"You wouldn't dare do that!" Sawyer cried.

"Wouldn't we?" cried the other. "You'll see when we know whether he will live or not. How is it, boys?" he continued, stepping toward the spot where Green lay.

The man bending over Green was about to reply when Nestor laid a hand on his arm. The boy had been awakened at the first shot and had slipped out of his tent and over to the side of the wounded man, being the first to arrive there.

"Wait," he said, as the ranger looked up in surprise. "Green is not seriously injured," Ned went on, "but I want to make that rascal think he is."

"What's the idea?" asked the other, glancing from face to face about him.

"When he stands under a tree with a rope about his neck," Ned said, "he'll tell us the truth about this affair."

"He was trying to steal the machine," the other said.

"Green has a bullet hole through his shoulder," Ned said, "but I want you to treat the

prisoner as if the shot had been fatal. Kindly carry him to his tent."

The command was instantly obeyed, for the foresters all knew why Ned was there, and understood that he was the personal representative of the Secret Service chief at Washington. Ned then called Frank aside and spoke a few words in a whisper. The boy grinned and hastened back to the group about Sawyer.

"Nestor wants to talk with Sawyer," he explained, "and wants me to take him to his tent."

"We'll take him to Nestor's tent after we get done with him," declared a burly forester whose face bore many evidences of the hard fight he had made during the fire. "It won't take us long to settle with him."

Frank spoke a few words to the man and he was one of the first to push the prisoner toward Nestor's tent.

"If you'll keep those men off me," were Sawyer's first words, "I'll tell you what you want to know. They mean to kill me."

"I think there is little doubt about that," was Ned's reply. "Why did you want the aeroplane?"

"If you must know," was the reply, "I was sent here to get it, or to wreck it so you couldn't use it."

This looked promising, and Ned waved a hand at Frank.

"Throw him out here!" came a gruff voice from the crowd.

"I won't tell," Sawyer went on, "unless you promise to keep them away from me. I didn't mean to kill Green, and no court will convict me."

"When did you come here?" asked Ned.

"A month ago," was the reply. "The day you landed in San Francisco a man came to my boarding house and employed me."

"He mentioned the aeroplane?"

"Yes, he knew all about it."

"Treachery in the Secret Service, eh?" asked Ned.

"I don't know how he gained his information," was the reply. "He told me that he had secured a job for me in the forest service, and that I was to join the crew in this district."

"And steal the aeroplane?"

"Steal it or wreck it. There are men with the other crews. You would have found an enemy wherever you landed."

This was all very amazing, and Ned wondered how many pitfalls had been set for him in San Francisco. He had no doubt that Sawyer

was telling the truth. The question was as to whether he would tell the story as it was from that point on.

"Who was it that engaged you—gave you your instructions?" he asked.

"I don't know," was the reply.

Ned swung his hand again, and a fierce demand that the prisoner should be thrown out arose from the group outside. Sawyer shivered and crept out of his camp-chair to Nestor's side. His face was deadly pale, being sheltered from the ruddy glow of the fires. Just where the men stood outside lay a red lance of light, giving a demon-like look to their rugged faces.

"If you don't tell me the truth," Ned said, "I can't protect you."

"I tell you I don't know," wailed the frightened man. "I had never seen him before. I wanted a job and took what he offered. I didn't think it would be so great a crime to steal or wreck an aeroplane."

"What were you to receive for the job?"

"One thousand dollars."

"Hurry up! Throw that sneak out!"

Sawyer, like the coward he was, threw himself down on the floor of the tent and groveled at Ned's feet.

"You would know the man again?" asked Ned.

"Yes; I can pick him out of a score of men."

"You will do this willingly?"

"Yes; I'm sick of the whole game. I didn't mean to hurt Green. I wanted to scare him away so I could get back to my tent without being recognized. That is all I wanted, and I did not mean to hit him at all."

There was a great deal more talk between the two. Ned soon became convinced that Sawyer was a weak man, morally and intellectually, who would be apt to follow the lead of one stronger than himself.

After Ned had left a guard over the man and visited Green—who was doing very well, and laughing over the trick the boy had played on Sawyer—he went back to his rough bed, well satisfied with the events of the night.

"By the way," Frank said, crawling into the tent after assisting in caring for the wounded man, "I don't understand what you mean by saying that you've got a clue which you think will force the man behind the scenes out on the stage, in full view of the audience. If there is such a clue hovering about I haven't become acquainted with it."

"The clue is hardly well enough advanced to talk about," Ned replied.

"But if you've got a line on the leader of this bunch you've won the case," suggested Frank.

"That is what the government sent me here for," Ned replied. "The chief of the Secret Service expects me to round up the man responsible for the frequent forest fires. I think now that he should have told me that smuggling was going on up here, but he may have had a good reason for not doing so."

"You know what Mr. Green said," Frank interrupted. "He said the government officers wanted you to take the case and find out everything for yourself. Perhaps they feared that you would pay too much attention to these smugglers, and let the forest fires issue go with scant investigation. They might have arrested the smugglers at any time, you know."

"Perhaps so," Ned replied, "but that wouldn't have brought the manager of these unlawful enterprises into the hands of the law. After all, the Secret Service men may have been right in sending me up here without instructions or special information. What a laugh they would have had if I had failed to discover the Chinamen and the opium."

"Perhaps they wanted to see if you would discover them," laughed Frank. "Have you any idea," he added, "that the Secret Service men knew that you would be followed in here—that the plans of the government regarding your work were known to the outlaws? Do you think they knew of the employment of Sawyer and the others by the men at the head of the conspiracy?"

"No; I hardly think the man who gave me final orders at San Francisco knew that all he did was known to the men he was fighting," Ned replied. "The head of the bunch put a good one over on him there."

"And came near putting one over on you, also," grinned Frank. "The aeroplane has been attacked twice already, and others are doubtless waiting to get a crack at it."

"They will have to hurry up if they do," Ned said, with a chuckle, "and you will have to look out for yourself if they succeed, for I'm going to have you take me to Missoula in the morning and then go back and collect the boys."

"And not come back here again?" asked Frank.

"Not unless we come back for a pleasure trip," was the reply.

"Well," Frank said, "that pleasure trip idea looks pretty good to me. Why not?"

"I may have time," Ned replied.

Frank threw himself on the blankets which had been provided by Mr. Green and closed his eyes, which were still smarting from the effects of the smoke.

"If you go away to-morrow," he said, presently, "what is to become of the clues we found in the cavern by the lake?"

"All provided for," Ned answered.

"And all the Chinks, and everything you discovered while visiting them in the caves almost under the divide?"

"Everything provided for," Ned said, sleepily.

"And you think you can close this case by going to San Francisco?" demanded Frank, a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

"Go to sleep, little boy," said Ned, in a tantalizing tone.

"But do you?" insisted the boy.

"Of course I do," was the muttered reply. "Go to sleep, little man!"

And Frank tried to obey, but sleep would not come. The fire still smouldered over in the west. The ruddy light of the embers was still

touching the camp with its red fingers. The smoke was still asserting itself in the air. The puzzle was still there!

After the boy had rolled over at least fifty times, and arose to consult a water bag at least a dozen times, he seated himself under the flap of the tent and looked out. There was a moon now, and the smoke only half hid it. Far off in the woods wild creatures were expressing their opinion of the fire and the wanton destruction of their homes. There was a faint rustle in the foliage of the trees east of the "burn."

"Gee!" the boy muttered. "I'd like to come back here for a month!"

Then his attention was attracted to the savage growl of some animal in the thicket beyond the fire limit of the "burn." It seemed to the boy as if some man-eating creature had cornered a bit of animate supper, but couldn't reach it. The language used by the forest resident seemed to be in the tongue of the panther. While he listened a cry which was not that of a hungry beast came out of the gloom.

That was a cry for help, surely. Frank put his revolver and his searchlight into convenient pockets and set out for the scene of the disturbance, without awakening any of the sleepers.

It was slow work pushing through the bushes, and the boy wondered if a fire there, well guarded on a quiet day, wouldn't be a good thing.

He kept his searchlight ahead and looked about for the source of the noises as he advanced in the darkness. In a short time he heard a voice he knew, but hardly expected to hear there.

"Hurry up!" the voice said. "I'm goin' to tumble out of this tree in about a minute! I'm that hungry! I thought you might meet me with a pie under one arm."

"Well, why don't you come down, then?" Frank asked.

"If you'll turn your honorable attention to that tree to the east," Jimmie said, "your excellency will observe a panther waiting for his supper. He's been tracking me all day, getting bolder every minute. Now, if I turn this searchlight away for an instant, he'll jump on me, and there you are. No more Jimmie McGraw than a rabbit!"

"I didn't see your light at first," Frank said, "for it was hidden by the foliage of the trees. I suppose you want me to shoot the cat?"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TIME FOR THE ROUND-UP.

"Sure," Jimmie answered. "Shoot the cat!"

"Well, keep your light on him, and wait until I can get where I can see him. The cat frequently resents being wounded."

"Cripes!" cried Jimmie. "Don't shoot unless you kill him, for he'll jump at me then for sure. He's angry now—hear him pound with his tail? I fired all my loads at him an' he dodged the bullets."

"You couldn't shoot craps!" scorned Frank.

The panther, a great brute made ferocious by the excitement of the fire, and probably scorched a little, could now be heard moving in the branches of a tree not far from that in which Jimmie was perched. In a moment Frank reached a point from which the beast's face could be seen.

He thought to himself that it looked like a tiger head fastened against a gray cloud with unseen pins. Jimmie's searchlight brought the evil face, the cruel eyes, the back-sloping ears,

the faintly-moving jaws, out into strong relief, as the circle of flame was only large enough to cover the face.

The beast heard Frank moving in the bushes below and turned its head to look, at the same time crouching low, as if to spring.

The first bullet struck him fair in the throat, the second entered the head just above the eyes, the third, coming so rapidly on the others that the three reports seemed to merge into one, entered the body over the heart. The great beast was dead when the body struck the ground.

Jimmie was not long in getting down to Frank's side and grasping him by the shoulders in a hug which threatened to end in a scuffle.

"Get away!" Frank said. "Suppose there's another cat here? If there is he'll get one of us through your foolishness."

"There were two," Jimmie said, coolly, "but I killed one."

"How did you get here?" was the next question, asked as the boys turned toward the camp.

"How do you think I got here?" returned Jimmie.

"Walked!" laughed Frank.

"Yes, I walked."

Jimmie stopped and rubbed his legs with careful hands.

"I'm all wore out!" he said. "I can't walk any farther to-night."

"All right," Frank said, with a grin. "I'll leave you both lights to keep the cats off with, and my gun, and come out after you in the morning after breakfast."

"Oh, my eats!" Jimmie cried. "Lead me to something that will sustain life! I'm starving, I tell you."

"You walked all the way?" asked Frank.

"Sure! Forty miles at least."

"Where are the others?"

"Pat, Jack and the Chink Scout? Pat came up just before I started, riding on a burro, an' in the custody of a small party of rangers, who thought he had been setting fires. The rangers went into camp over there, all tired out, an' Jack an' Pat settled down with them. I run away."

"They don't know where you are?" asked Frank.

"Nix know!" replied the boy.

"But how did you ever get through the burning forest?" asked Frank, hardly believing the boy's story of his long walk.

"This 'burn' is only a mile wide," Jimmie said. "I walked on the south edge of it. Say,

there are plenty of lives lost! Bears, an' cats, an' all that. I guess this will be an agreeable place to live in about a week —not!"

The boy was indeed "all in," as he expressed it. He had walked since early morning through a tangled forest black with smoke, through an atmosphere burned and smoked out of its life-giving qualities. And all this exertion in order that he might be near his chum, Nestor.

Fortune had favored the lad, and he had at last blundered on the camp where Ned had taken refuge, otherwise he might have died in the forest from hunger and exhaustion, or been devoured by some of the savage beasts which had followed him all day.

"Where's Ned?" Jimmie asked, as they stood before the little row of tents.

"Asleep," was the reply, "and you let him alone for to-night. He's been having a lively time. But how in the name of all that's wonderful did you ever find your way here?" the boy added.

"I don't know," was the reply. "I knew that Ned would be wherever the fire was, and so started east. Not so very long ago I heard a couple of shots, and that directed me toward the camp. Who was hurt?"

Frank explained, briefly, what had taken place, hunted up a liberal meal for the boy, and then saw him settled for the night.

Ned's astonishment at seeing the boy in the morning may well be imagined.

"Huh!" Jimmie said. "You thought you would fool me out of all the fun!"

Ned laughed and asked about the others, finally informing Jimmie that he was leaving that morning for San Francisco by the aeroplane route.

"Then I'm goin'!" declared the boy. "I'm not goin' to be chucked into the discard again."

"You'll have to sit in Frank's lap," grinned Ned, "and the machine may tip over with such a load, at that."

"I guess it didn't tip over when Frank and Jack an' yours truly run it," Jimmie replied. "Anyway, I'm goin' with you."

Before leaving for Missoula, where he was to surrender the aeroplane to Frank, Ned had another long talk with Mr. Green, whose wound was not so serious as it had been considered the night before. The forester told him what he knew of the men under the leadership of Greer, saying that he might have arrested Greer at any time during the month, and, what is more, con-

victed him of smuggling both Chinamen and opium over the border.

"But what good would it have done?" Green went on. "The conspirators in Washington, or New York, or San Francisco would have chosen another leader, and the game would have gone on as before."

"That is very true," Ned admitted, "and still, it seems to me that the time to round the fellows up has come!"

"Do you give that as an order?" asked the other, a flash of excitement showing in his face.

"Yes," was the reply.

"But some of them have gone to Portland with the Chinks—some to Frisco, I think. What about that?"

"If you can spare men," Ned said, "follow them."

"You're on!" laughed Green. "I've been waiting for some such orders for a long time. You're on!"

"And follow on to Frisco as soon as you can," Ned continued. "Address me, or look for me, if you are able to be about after you get there, at the Federal building."

"I'll be there in a week," Green said, his eyes showing the joy of the coming fight with

the outlaws, "and I'll have a bunch of prisoners with me."

The forester hesitated a moment, as the importance of the proposed move came to him, then faced Ned with a hesitating look. It was plain to the boy that Green wanted to ask a question which he believed to be either personal or impertinent.

"Is there something else?" Ned asked.

Green still hesitated, his eyes on the ground.

"Are you sure of your clues?" he asked, then.

"I think so," was the reply.

"Because, you see," Green went on, "the government doesn't want any trap sprung until the whole bilin' is within reaching distance. After the good work you have done here, I wouldn't like to have you order the round-up and then find that the men you wanted were still out on the range."

"Thank you for your frankness," Ned replied.

"I just want to be sure that you are sure," smiled Green. "It would mix things for me to make these arrests and have the big ones get away, now, wouldn't it?"

"Indeed it would," Ned admitted, "but I think it is safe to go ahead as we planned a moment ago."

"All right!" Green said, but there was still doubt in his eyes.

"And I'll accept all the responsibility," Ned added.

"I have a suggestion to make," Green said, then. "Why not go on to Frisco in the aeroplane and ask for instructions? You can make the trip in the air-ship in no time, but it is a long ride by rail."

"I think," Ned replied, with a laugh, "that the game will be ripe just about the time I get to Frisco by rail. Besides, I don't want the outlaws to know that I'm going to the city. They would know it if they saw the aeroplane making for the coast. Well, if I leave Frank navigating it in this district they will think I am still here. Don't you see?"

"Go it!" laughed Green. "I reckon you know what you're about."

"Anyway," Ned said, "I've got to play the game in my own way if I play it at all."

"I see," observed Green, and the two parted.

The aeroplane had not been damaged at all by the fire, but Ned went over it carefully before attempting a start. Sawyer, trembling with fright, was brought out to show where he had meddled with the machinery.

"I didn't harm it any," the prisoner said.

"There are some burrs missing," Ned said.

Sawyer brought half a dozen out of a pocket and passed them to Ned with a reluctant hand.

"I neglected to tell you that I had them in my pocket," he said.

"What did Green say to you this morning?" asked Ned, screwing the burrs on where they were needed.

"He says he won't be hard on me, if I tell all I know about the men who are doing these tricks," was the reply.

"You told me all you know?" asked Ned.

"Yes, there is nothing else to tell. I'm so glad to think that Green is not going to die from the wound I gave him that I'll do everything in my power to bring the men who put me up to this to punishment."

"Sure you can identify the man who hired you?"

"Dead certain," was the reply.

"Then I'll have one of the men bring you to Frisco," Ned said. "You will be wanted there."

"All right; anything the government wants goes!"

In half an hour the three boys, Ned, Frank and Jimmie, were on the aeroplane, sailing

through the clear air of a splendid summer morning. Below they could see the long, narrow strip of land which had been swept by the fires. Off to the north was the British frontier, with Lake Kintla glimmering in the sunshine.

"Aren't we going back to that lake cavern again?" asked Frank.

"Not just now," Ned replied.

"I didn't know that you got all you wanted in there," Frank went on. "I had an idea that you were trying to identify the man we found dead there."

"I think I learned all there was to learn there," Ned replied.

"He spent a lot of time in there before he went to Frisco," Jimmie said. "He made me go in there with him, and I didn't like it."

"And so no one will ever know who the dead man was?" asked Frank.

"I have been given a name," Ned said, "a name to call him by, but I don't exactly like to accept the information, considering the source from which it came."

The aeroplane drifted to the west and north easily under the steady pulse of the motors, and the plateau where Jimmie had left the boys and the foresters was soon in sight.

"I wonder if they're all alive?" said Jimmie.

"What could happen to them?" demanded Frank.

"Oh," Jimmie replied, with biting sarcasm, "there is nothing here to harm 'em! This is a pink tea, this is! This is a church fair, where you get ices made out of the cream they skim off the cistern!"

"You're getting nutty!" Frank said, with a grin.

"When I left 'em," Jimmie went on, "the boys an' the foresters were wondering if the outlaws would come back an' kill 'em one by one or just blow up the caves underneath the plateau an' send 'em up in the air without any good means of gettin' down."

"Then we'll look them up," Ned said.

The great divide lay down below, and the plateau was in plain sight, with the early sunshine streaming over it. When the aeroplane circled about it a shout came up to Ned's ears, then a shot, and the powder smoke drifted lazily upward in the clear air.

"Somethin' doin'!" Jimmie cried. "Suppose we go down an' see."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWO INANIMATE WITNESSES.

It was very still in the bachelor apartment, and, as on the occasion of his previous visit, Nestor saw, as he slipped through the doorway leading from the private hall, that the lights were burning low.

On this night there was no opium-drugged victim lying on the couch. There was a movement in the room beyond, and Ned could hear the soft tread of slippered feet and occasionally the rattle of dishes. It was evident that midnight luncheon was being prepared, and that the master of the habitation would soon be on hand.

Closing the door softly—the same having been opened with a skeleton key—Ned stepped across the room to the writing desk which he had examined on that other night. After searching the half-open drawer for an instant, he took out a number of papers and examined them. He also took a check-book out and put it into a pocket. The papers he returned to

the desk. The check-book was an old one, there being few blank checks in the binding, but plenty of stubs.

Then Ned looked at the lock of the desk. It had been out of repair at his previous visit, but was in excellent shape now. He removed the new key and inserted the one with the broken stem which had so excited the interest of Albert Lemon and Jap on occasion of his previous visit.

The key with the broken stem did not fit. A new lock had been put on. Next Ned went to a mantel over a gas grate and lifted the cover from a little ivory box which stood there. At the very bottom of the box, under buttons, pins, needles, and odds and ends, he found a key. This one was whole, and it was an exact duplicate of the one with the broken stem.

Ned had been in San Francisco three days, and Jimmie was not far away. On bringing the aeroplane to the plateau on the day of his return to Missoula he had found Ernest Whipple, Jack, Pat, Liu, and a small party of rangers anxiously awaiting him. Also "several tough ones waitin' for an introduction," as Jimmie put it. It seems that the fake foresters had returned to the cave after the fire in the cañon had burned itself out and had at once discovered

that the prisoner had vanished, also that Liu, the Chinese boy, had disappeared with him.

There had been a long search for the missing boys, as the outlaws knew very well that the escape meant the bringing of officers to the caves, but they had not been discovered until a short time before the arrival of the aeroplane.

When Ned reached the plateau—in fact, before he reached it—he heard the whistling of bullets aimed at the big bird. The outlaws were trying to cripple the aeroplane and so give the riders a tumble. The boys landed in safety, however, and joined the others.

Seeing the boys thus reinforced, the outlaws had withdrawn, and the rangers had conducted them to a pass which led over the divide. So it was that Ned had left them, making their way down toward the Valley of the Wild Animals, where a large number of rangers were encamped, and where Frank was to come for them with the aeroplane as soon as Ned landed at Missoula.

There were numerous shots fired at the aeroplane as it mounted into the sky again, but no harm was done.

"If they had been shootin' at that cat last night," Jimmie said, in derision, "they would 'a' been eaten alive."

"They are nervous," Frank said, "and don't dare come out of their hiding places so as to get a good sight at us. They are afraid of the rangers, and afraid that we'll drop a bomb or something of that sort down on them."

This explanation of the bad marksmanship, as well as the failure of the outlaws to rush the aeroplane, was accepted by the boys, who had anticipated a fight with the fellows. It was afterwards learned, too, that there were only half a dozen outlaws in the group, and that they had been sent back to guard the caves and not to fight rangers unless they were attacked.

Ned had been very busy since his return to the city, having made many inquiries concerning Albert Lemon and his servant, the Japanese attendant who had given the boy such a chilly reception on the night of the first visit.

Lemon, he had been informed, was a millionaire of eccentric habits. According to Ned's source of information, he would absent himself from his usual haunts for days at a time, and would then return to shut himself up in his rooms, at home to no one, and attended only by Jap.

After a time the clatter of dishes grew louder in the adjoining room, giving notice, doubtless,

that the luncheon being prepared was nearly ready to serve. Then the boy seated himself behind a screen which cut off a corner of the room and waited. He had occupied his retreat only a short time when a key turned in the door and the man he had talked with on his first visit entered.

It was not the old, half-dazed, disreputable Lemon who stepped into the room, but a young man handsomely dressed and evidently very wide awake and in the best of spirits. After seeing that the window shades were closely drawn he turned on the lights and dropped into a chair at the writing desk.

Ned saw him rummage the pigeon-holes for a moment, extract a folded paper, and fall to checking off the items. The boy had examined this sheet while at the desk, and so knew what it contained. After checking the items the man drew out a long pocket-book and placed its contents on the writing board.

The boy gave a quick start when he saw what the book had contained, for a large package of yellow-back bank notes lay exposed to view. The man counted them carefully, compared the total with the figures he had marked

on the sheet, and then sat back in his chair with a satisfied smile on his face.

"Everything correct!" he said.

Then he lighted a cigar and turned to the door opening into the inner room.

"Jap!" he called softly. "Oh, Jap!"

The door opened and the servant looked in.

"Come here!" Lemon commanded. "What have you been doing?" he added, as the Jap stood before him.

"Nothing," was the reply.

"You are not telling the truth," Lemon said. "You have been seen about the city, in tea houses, talking with strangers."

"I have not been out of the rooms," the other insisted, stubbornly.

"Let it pass," Lemon said, in a moment. "There may be some mistake. Any one been here?"

"No one."

The servant appeared to have a perfect knowledge of English. He looked into his master's face with a bland smile, but now and then his eyes sought the screen behind which Ned was hidden.

"Well, some of the boys will be up here to-

night," Lemon said. "See that there is plenty to eat. Go, now."

The servant turned to the door opening into the private hall, stood with his hand on the knob for an instant, and then, apparently changing his mind, went out through the doorway by which he had entered. If Lemon had been listening intently he would have heard a quick movement in the back room as Jap closed the door.

In a moment there was another movement in the private hall, and then Ned heard the corridor door open. He pushed the screen aside and stepped out before the astonished occupant of the rooms.

"What does this mean?" Lemon demanded, a quiver of excitement—or it might have been consternation—in his voice.

While he spoke he moved toward a table where a revolver lay in full view.

"Never mind that," Ned said, coolly. "We can arbitrate our differences without its assistance. Besides, it is not loaded."

"What are you doing here?" Lemon almost shouted, his face growing white, either with rage or fear. "Leave the room immediately."

Ned dropped into a chair and motioned toward another.

"Sit down!" he ordered.

"Your impudence is amazing," Lemon said, but he took the chair.

In a moment, however, he turned to the door.

"Jap!" he called.

Again the door opened and the servant looked in.

"Are you armed?" Lemon asked.

The servant nodded, fixing a pair of inscrutable eyes on Ned's face as he did so.

"Very well," was the reply. "Stand there by the door. How did this man gain entrance here?"

The only reply was a shrug of the shoulders.

"Let it pass for the present," Lemon said, with a smile of triumph. "Stand there and shoot when I give the word."

The servant nodded again. Ned remained seated, his eyes fixed coolly on the face of the master.

"Now, what do you want?" demanded Lemon. "You don't look exactly like a common sneak thief."

"You doubtless remember," Ned began, in a level voice, "that I did myself the honor of

calling at these rooms not long ago in quest of information of one—of one Felix Emory?"

Lemon started at the name, but gained confidence as he glanced toward the servant at the door.

"Yes, I remember," he said. "What about it?"

There was a sharp ring at the corridor door before Ned spoke again. The Jap looked inquiringly at his master.

"Company may prove of value just now," Lemon said. "Will you see who is there?"

It was clear to Ned that Lemon expected some of the associates he had mentioned as "the boys" when giving instructions about the luncheon, and there was a smile of welcome on his face when a bustle in the hall told of an arrival.

There was only one man, however, and Lemon at first seemed disappointed, but in a moment he had his face under perfect control again.

"Father!" he cried, springing to his feet. "It is good to see you here!"

The newcomer, a man of perhaps sixty, well dressed and with the air of a man to whom marked attention was due, stood looking into

Lemon's face for an instant and then grasped his hand.

"You have changed little, my son," he said.

Lemon smiled and indicated Ned with a slight motion of the hand.

"Permit me to present to you my father, Mr. Leon Lemon," he said, "and this, father, is a boy burglar who broke into my rooms in quest of plunder a short time ago," he added. "We were having quite a cheerful talk when you came. I don't know his name, unfortunately."

The old gentleman gave a start and attempted to rise from his chair.

"Don't distress yourself," Lemon said. "He is quite harmless. Besides, Jap has him covered with the cannon he delights to carry."

"This is a strange situation," the other said, wiping the sweat of excitement from his face.

"One of the incidents which add to the joy of life," Lemon said. "You remember Felix Emory?" he added. "Well, his pretense for this call is that he came to ask about him. Go ahead, Mr. Burglar."

"Perhaps you will also remember," Ned went on, "that on my former visit here I exhibited a key with a broken stem—the key to that writing desk?"

Lemon's face hardened and he glanced furtively at the servant, but said not a word.

"This key," Ned said, producing the one mentioned, "was found in the pocket of the man who was found dead in the Rocky Mountains. You think you left it in the suit of clothes you gave Emory?"

"Possibly," was the strained reply. "But we have had enough of this," Lemon added. "Call the police, Jap."

"Just a moment," Ned went on, when the Jap moved toward the door. "When you could not find the key, Mr. Lemon, why didn't you use the duplicate. The duplicate you kept in the box on the shelf? Why did you think it necessary to break the lock?"

"The servant did that," was the angry reply.

"I see," Ned replied, coolly, "perhaps that was done while you were up in the mountains with Emory—before he was killed?"

"Possibly," Lemon gritted out.

"Now, since talking with you," Ned continued, "I have been up in the mountains. There I found a man using a typewriter. By the way, have you a machine here?"

"Certainly not," was the angry reply.

"But you formerly used one here?"

"Never!" was the reply.

"That is strange," Ned said, "for when I came in here not long ago I took the liberty of looking through some papers in your desk, for which I ask your pardon. Well, I discovered that the machine you used here carried a defective letter 'c.' It looked in the writing like an 'o.' The machine the man was using under the divide had the same defect. If you will observe the sheet you were examining a few moments ago, you will note the imperfect letter."

Lemon's teeth clinked together sharply, but he did not speak.

"When I came here last," Ned continued, "you lay in an opium stupor on that couch. You had recently returned from a trip to Lake Kintla, where Emory was found dead. While in that section you visited a cavern on the eastern slope of the divide. There is where you used the typewriter taken from these rooms."

"My son never learned the keyboard," said the old gentleman, an angry snap in his eyes. "He has never found it necessary to earn money."

Lemon turned to the old man and bowed, gratefully.

"When you lay on the couch that night," Ned continued, "there was the smear of the typewriter on the middle finger of your left hand, close to the nail. I use a double keyboard machine myself, and sometimes smut my finger on the ribbon when I turn the platen. Some papers I chanced upon in the mountains bear the mark of a smudged hand. You are careless in using the machine. You even left a blue record ribbon in the cave headquarters where the dead man was found. That was my first valuable clue!"

"What papers did you steal while in the mountains?" demanded Lemon, springing to his feet, his face deadly white, his fists swinging aimlessly in the air.

"Lists," Ned replied. "Lists of Chinamen brought from over the border, and lists of opium cases smuggled in. I have the papers in my possession now. They match with the statement you examined just before I made my appearance in the room—just before you counted the money you received from this illegal traffic."

The old man leaped at Ned, but the boy moved away and stood by the door. The Jap stepped closer. There came a sound of whis-

pering, a noise of footsteps, from the hall outside. Then the door was opened and Greer, Slocum, Chang Chee and two others entered, glancing keenly at Ned as they passed him, still standing by the door.

"Do you mean to accuse my son of crime?" shouted the old man, not noticing the newcomers in his rage and excitement. "You scoundrel!"

"How do you know," Ned asked, with a smile at the others, "that this man is Albert Lemon, your son?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAN BEHIND THE SCENES.

"Not my son!" shouted the old man. "This has gone quite far enough! Jap, call the police, and order this mad youngster taken away."

The younger man broke into a harsh laugh and turned to those who had just entered. Slocum and Chang Chee were whispering together, and a dangerous looking knife showed in the hand of the false ranger.

"You hear what father says, boys," Lemon said. "Remember that."

"What is this kid doing here, anyway?" demanded Slocum.

"He came here, evidently, for the purpose of blackmailing me," Lemon said. "He has papers stolen from the mountains—lists, he says they are—and they should be taken from him by force."

Slocum and Chang Chee started toward the boy, but he waved them back with his hand.

"I will lay the papers on the table," he said. "You are quite welcome to them for the present."

"I'll take him down to the police station," said Chang. "He ought not to be at large. Come, youngster."

"You seem to be able to talk pretty good English now," laughed Ned. "Much better than the slang you gave out in the mountains."

"Come!" shouted the Chinaman. "You are here alone, so there is no need of a fight. Come along!"

"We'll see about my being here alone presently," Ned said. "Anyhow, I'd better be here alone than with any one of you in the dark streets. I should be murdered before a block was passed. That is what you came to Frisco for, to murder me—just as the man in the lake cavern was murdered."

Those in the room looked at each other and remained silent. There was a tense moment, when every person there seemed gathering for a spring, when the lust of blood seemed in every glaring eye, but it passed.

"Where are the Chinamen you brought away from the British border?" asked Ned of Chang Chee. "Are they in this city? Oh," he continued, as Chang glared at him, "we knew that you were about to bring in a batch. You usually light forest fires in order to attract the attention

of the rangers when you get ready to unload a band of Chinese on Uncle Sam. That is Doyers street cunning, Chang!"

"You see," he went on, "we have had the good luck to discover why the forests in Northern Idaho and Montana have been set on fire so frequently. I don't care to say what I think of the wisdom of your course in so attempting to hide your movements, except that it attracted attention instead of diverting it. You firebugs might have been arrested long ago," he continued, turning to Slocum, "but it was thought best to wait until the head center of the whole conspiracy was in the hands of the law. Now that this has been accomplished, I may speak."

The people standing around the boy looked into each other's faces, and there was a movement as if to draw weapons.

"Permit me to congratulate you on the discovery of the leader of the outlaws," the old man said with a snarl. "Perhaps you will be kind enough to give us his name?"

"There are no objections that I know of," was the reply. "His name is Felix Emory. You may have heard of him."

"An old acquaintance of my son Albert," the old man said.

"That is the name of the man who was so mysteriously murdered in the Kintla lake cave," Slocum observed. "Why do you place the crime on the dead?"

"Felix Emory," Ned said, "is not dead. He is alive at this moment—alive and in this room!"

The young man broke into a jarring laugh and turned to the old man.

"You remember the strange resemblance between Felix and myself," he said. "Well, it seems to have deceived this clever young man. By the way, Slocum, why don't you take the lad to the police station? We have no more time for him here."

Slocum and another sprang forward, but Ned opened the door with a quick motion and stood beyond their reach.

"The man found dead in the cave," the boy said, facing the old man, "had met with an accident in his youth. The first joint of the little finger of the right hand was missing. Also, there was a scar over his left eye—a trifling scar, made with a knife in the hands of a playmate.

Do you recall these marks of identification, Mr. Lemon?" he added.

The old man threw his hands to his face and stood silent for a moment while the others looked on in perplexed silence. When he uncovered his face again he stepped forward to the man he had called his son on entering the room.

"Let me see your hands, Albert," he said, kindly. "Bend down so I can see the scar on your forehead!"

"Step aside, you old fool!" the young man cried, pushing the old man back rudely. "We have had enough of this, boys," he continued, turning to the others. "The game is up unless we get rid of this dotard and this boy. Why don't you get busy?"

The old man dropped into a chair and lifted his face to Ned's.

"You found my son murdered?" he asked. "Then this man Felix Emory stands in his shoes! Even I was deceived by him! Why, he has been calling upon me for large sums of money during the past month. He has taken possession of my boy's rooms. Was it this man Emory who killed him?"

"We believe so," was the reply. "The proof is within reaching distance."

"Out with them both!" shouted Emory.

"Your son Albert took this man in and tried to do something for him," Ned went on, "and was robbed and murdered for his pains. This man Emory was the leader of this choice band of smugglers and firebugs when he came to your son. The band was on the point of scattering because the officers were close on their track. They needed a man well up in the world—a man against whom the breath of suspicion had never been blown—to represent them in the opium market and the smuggled Chinamen market. They sent this man Emory to your son with a proposition, and he turned him down. Then they parted. But Albert knew too much and so he was lured to the woods and killed, and Emory stood before the world as your son. It was a devilish plot, great wealth being the object. If you will look at the stubs in this checkbook you will see the difference in the handwriting."

"I rather admire your nerve, boy," Slocum said to Ned. "You've got the right kind of courage to stand up here and tell all this to us. You know very well that we can never let you go out of this place alive? That even this old man must suffer for your bit of foolish daring?"

"I'd like to have the training of that kid for a few years," Chang said. "I could beat the world with him!"

"Well, you all know what we've got to do," Emory said, angrily. "We've got to get rid of the boy and this old man. If we do not, there is an end of a rather profitable business. Besides, with Albert Lemon dead, I become his heir, with no possible chance of being identified as Felix Emory."

"You devil!" shouted the old man. "You murderer!"

Enraged by the exclamation, Emory made a rush for the old man, but was stopped by a voice from the doorway opening into the rear room.

"That'll be all for you!" the voice said.

It was Jimmie who stood in the doorway, smiling, and making about the worst bow a Boy Scout ever made.

"Don't wiggle about so, gentlemen," he added, "for the men behind this partition have you all covered with repeating rifles, and some of them are nervous. Stand still while a friend of mine presents you with wristlets."

Jap turned and faced the frightened group and then pointed to the wall, near the ceiling,

where a line of two-inch holes were seen, at each hole a shining eye.

"You see," he said, "I cut those holes there to-night, so the boys wouldn't have to lie hidden under the furniture. There's a gun behind every one of them. And now, with your permission—"

Jimmie passed out a bunch of clattering, ringing handcuffs, and Jap slipped them on the wrists of the prisoners. As he did so Frank came dashing into the room, swinging his cap aloft. Ernest, Jack, Pat and Liu were there, too, overjoyed at the great victory.

"Wow!" he cried. "Here's a wire saying that the bunch was captured at Portland to-night, and another from Missoula says the men left in the caverns were caught yesterday. I have the honor to report, Mr. Sherlock Holmes Nestor," he added, with a low bow, "that the round-up is complete."

"Our day will come directly," Emory shouted. "You haven't a word of proof against any of us. Your story sounds all right here, but wait until you get into court. Our lawyers will pick your yarn apart like a rag doll. And you, Jap," he went on, turning to the servant, "when did you turn against me?"

"There have been two instances of false personation in this case," Ned said. "You, Emory, personated Albert Lemon, whom you murdered, and you, Jap, personated the servant Emory brought here after he had seen you carried out of the rooms for dead."

"Then that isn't my servant at all?" asked Emory.

"I was in the employ of Albert Lemon," answered the Jap, "when you took him away and killed him. When you came back from the mountains you caused me to be drugged and killed, as you supposed. But your servant hesitated in the work. He finally turned against you, and permitted me to come here in his stead. It was he who disclosed the hiding place of the duplicate key. He told me, and I told Mr. Nestor."

"It is all a blackmailing conspiracy!" cried Emory.

"When Mr. Nestor came back to the city, three days ago," the servant went on, "I was told by the man I was personating in these rooms that the whole plot was known. He said that Mr. Nestor knew that you were not Albert Lemon, also that I, Albert Lemon's servant, still

lived. I didn't have much to tell him when he came to me, but I told him all I knew."

"And you let him search my rooms?" cried Emory.

"Of course," was the cool reply. "He has everything required to send you to the gallows for the murder of Albert Lemon, and everything necessary in the case against the smugglers and firebugs, too. He found Emory's servant," he added, facing the father, "in a Japanese tea house, and brought him here to me after the closing scene was set for to-night. You may talk with him if you want to. He can tell you how the murder of your son was planned, also how the plot to kill Mr. Nestor in the mountains was laid—here in these rooms."

Again the old man sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. It was a severe blow to him. He had arrived in San Francisco that day, anticipating a pleasant month with his son. And now to find him dead!

"It would be interesting," said Slocum, speaking for the first time since the arrests, "to know just how this remarkable boy discovered the connection between this flat and the mountain caves."

"The murder brought the clue," Ned replied. "From the first the clue led here. And then the key without a stem, the smudge on Emory's finger, the typewritten sheets, the machine in the mountains—oh, it was all easy enough after the discovery that this man Emory did not know where Albert Lemon kept his duplicate key to that desk!

"The case is ended," Ned continued, "and all the parties wanted by the law are under arrest, so, if you don't mind, gentlemen, I'll go to bed!"

Jack, Pat, Ernest and Liu now advanced into the room and looked smilingly at their leader.

"You can't lose us," Jack said. "If you don't mind, we'll take you back to the Rocky Mountains for a little fun with the aeroplane. I guess there won't be any bold bad smugglers up there to distract our attention for a few weeks."

"And then," Jimmie cut in, "I hope you'll all go back to little old New York. I'm hungry and thirsty, and sleepy for a walk down the good old Bowery and the wise old White Way!"

The case against Felix Emory was so complete that he pleaded guilty on being arraigned

in court and was sentenced to the gallows. Chang received a long sentence for his connection with the murder, and the smugglers and firebugs were sent to prison for ten years each.

The clean-up was so complete that Ned was requested to visit Washington and confer with the Secret Service chief regarding other cases.

"But, after all," he said, on leaving Jimmie and the other boys, including Ernest and Liu, in New York, "I don't think I want any more fighting forest fires assignments in the Secret Service. We'll go back some day and look over the ground, but I don't think I'll ever be able to get some of those rides in the air out of my mind."

THE END.

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